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Allegiances

HiddenClan
HiddenClan lives in deciduous forests with easily accessible tree branches to climb. Their camp is in a shallow dip in the earth with massive trees surrounding their camp. The walls are also made of brambles. These cats are great tree climbers and hunt in the trees as well as the ground. Their hindquarters are strong for leaping from tree to tree. They are friendly and close amongst themselves but hostile to strangers/invaders. To the other clans, they are evasive except for during the Gatherings.
Leader-Skystar: blue-gray tom with amber eyes
Deputy-Ravenwing: black tom with a white chest
Medicine Cat-Mistypool: gray and white tabby she-cat
Warriors-
-Thrushfeather: golden-brown tom with dark flecks
-Raccoontail: long-haired gray she-cat with a black face and two tail rings
-Darknight: dark brown tabby tom
-Ashcloud: long-haired gray she-cat
-Birchleap: pale gray tom with black stripes
-Goldenheart: golden tabby she-cat with white paws
-Pineclaw: strong brown tabby tom
-Flameheart: orange tabby she-cat with amber eyes
-Nightfang: black tom with amber eyes
-Briarfrost: beautiful ginger, gray, and white tabby she-cat with green eyes
Apprentices-
-Wolfpaw: dark gray tom with white points (mentor: Nightfang)
-Sablepaw: cream-colored she-cat (mentor: Briarfrost)
-Hollowpaw: pale ginger tabby tom (mentor: Birchleap)
Queens-
-Olivenose: dark brown she-cat with green eyes (mother to Ravenwing's kits: Crowkit and Wrenkit)
-Starlingwing: tortoiseshell she-cat (mother to Pineclaw's kits: Hazelkit and Lilackit)
Kits-

-Crowkit: dusty black tom (mother: Olivenose)
-Wrenkit: brown and white tabby she-kit (mother: Olivenose)
-Rowankit: red-brown tom with spotted tabby markings and green eyes
-Hazelkit: tortoiseshell and white she-kit with hazel eyes (mother: Starlingwing)
-Lilackit: pale brown tabby she-kit with blue eyes (mother: Starlingwing)
Elders-
-Fernshade: light brown tabby she-cat

RainClan
RainClan lives in thin woodland with many meadows and streams. They are great swimmers and fish is their main prey. Their bodies are strong and lithe with webbed paws for swimming. Their camp is on an island surrounded by a very shallow stream. To outsiders, they are friendly until they're given a reason not to be. That doesn't mean they allow invaders.
Leader-Brookstar: light gray tabby she-cat with green eyes
Deputy-Darkwater: dark gray tom with amber eyes
Medicine Cat-Quietrain: blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes
Warriors-
-Marshfur: brown and white tabby tom
-Pebblestream: gray she-cat with darker flecks
-Toadleap: light brown tabby tom
-Willowsong: long-haired brown and white tabby she-cat
-Foxtooth: russet tom with black paws
-Daisypetal: cream-colored she-cat
-Sunspots: white tom with ginger patches
-Mossbreeze: lithe black she-cat with green eyes
Apprentices-
-Lionpaw: large, long-haired golden-brown tom (mentor: Sunspots)
-Flowerpaw: black and white she-cat (mentor: Willowsong)
-Shrewpaw: dark brown tabby tom (mentor: Foxtooth)
-Tansypaw: brown and white tabby she-cat (mentor: Quietrain)
Queens-
-Ivysplash: silver tabby she-cat with black stripes (mother to Toadleap's kit: Frostkit)
-Roseflight: long-haired ginger tabby she-cat (expecting Darkwater's kits)

Kits-
-Frostkit: silver and white tabby she-kit with blue eyes
Elders-None

SwiftClan
SwiftClan lives on the open moorland and their camp is in a ravine. These cats are small and fast which they use to their advantage when fighting. Their main prey are rabbits. SwiftClan cats can be aloof with strangers, but for the most part they are friendly.
Leader-Hawkstar: dark brown tabby tom with a white chest
Deputy-Gorsetail: light brown tabby tom
Medicine Cat-Driftsong: pale gray she-cat
Warriors-
-Eaglewing: dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail
-Cloudheart: lithe white she-cat
-Falconeye: light brown tabby tom with amber eyes
-Runningcreek: silver tabby she-cat
-Stoneclaw: dark gray tom
-Sagetail: brown and white tabby she-cat
-Twistfoot: large tabby tom with a lame paw
-Tawnyfeather: tortoiseshell she-cat
Apprentices-
-Eclipsepaw: black and white she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Sagetail)
-Windpaw: black tom with a white chest (mentor: Runningcreek)
-Gentlepaw: small gray tabby she-cat (mentor: Cloudheart)
-Vinepaw: pale brown tom with dark brown stripes (mentor: Falconeye)
-Fogpaw: pale gray and white tom (mentor: Gorsetail)
Queens-
-Russetlight: russet tabby she-cat (mother to Falconeye's kits: Amberkit, Snowkit, and Kestrelkit)
Kits-
-Amberkit: ginger tabby she-kit (mother: Russetlight)
-Kestrelkit: light brown tabby tom (mother: Russetlight)
-Snowkit: gray and white she-kit (mother: Russetlight)
Elders-
-Adderstrike: dark brown tabby tom

Prologue

[image]

The forest was dark and the air was filled with fog. Trees stood tall and outlined against the moonlight and a small breeze caused the branches to sway. Shadows danced with the moonlight on the forest floor, fighting for dominance. In the distance, the hoot of an owl echoed off of the trees.

Among the shadows, a shape moved silently through the forest. Her brilliant white fur made her easy to spot among the darkness. She moved quickly with a destination in mind. The white she-cat kept her eyes and ears alert for anyone following her, although she doubted it.

Her heart pounded against her chest with nervousness and excitement. It's been a moon since she's seen him and she had exciting news for him! The trees began to grow thinner as she went on, allowing more moonlight to escape through the canopy. She kept her blue eyes trained in front of her as she continued on her way.

Finally, she reached their usual meeting place. It was a meadow clearing hidden by willow trees. The clearing was near the RainClan border which is why there were a few stray willow trees on HiddenClan's side of the border. She paused and sat to wait for him. He wouldn't be late, he never was.

A twig snapped behind her and she spun around to meet the intruder. But it was only him. She relaxed when she found his dark eyes and reacquainted herself with his familiar russet tabby pelt. He stepped towards her and they brushed their noses against each other. It's been too long since she's seen him.

"Ivorymoon, I've missed you," He purred, nuzzling her shoulder. In the dark, he couldn't quite see the secret she'd brought with her.

"I have something to tell you," Ivorymoon murmured excitedly. "I'm

expecting kits!"

The russet tom didn't move or even blink. He didn't seem surprised at all. Instead, his dark eyes gleamed with something that Ivorymoon didn't recognize. Ivorymoon became unsettled by this. Would he say anything?

"That's great, Ivorymoon," He purred, licking her cheek.

She sighed in relief that he seemed happy. "They're due in a moon," She told him.

He leaned in closer to whisper in her ear, "I can't wait."

~*~

1 Moon Later

"Come on, Ivorymoon! Push!"

Her body heaved and the contractions racked her body. She's been at this for what seemed like hours and her kits have yet to arrive. Blood covered the nursery floor and it stained her white tabby pelt. Ivorymoon was extremely tired and weak.

"The first kit's almost here," Mistypool mewed excitedly, she knew the mother was fading fast.

Then, a kit emerged into the world. Mistypool licked him clean and saw that his pelt was reddish brown with darker spotted tabby markings. He looked like a little red leopard. She laid the strong tom kit next to Ivorymoon.

When Ivorymoon laid eyes on her newborn son, her blue eyes filled with love. "He looks just like his father..." Her body convulsed and Mistypool started shouting. More blood had spilt onto the ground, covering the dying mother and newborn son. Faint moonlight entered the den, causing the crimson pool to shimmer slightly.

"Ivorymoon!" Mistypool shouted, "Come on, you've got one more kit to deliver!"

But Ivorymoon had no more fight in her. She looked down at her son one last time and laid her head to rest. Then her life left her, and she left her newborn son an orphan.

Chapter 1

[image]

Rowankit sat at the nursery entrance and watched Crowkit and Wrenkit play with the other kits. They were his adopted littermates, but they acted towards him as if he were a stranger. Crowkit especially would bully him and play too roughly. They were about the same age, but Crowkit was bigger and therefore stronger. Wrenkit followed her brother's lead and although she was too small to *really* bully him, her tongue was sharp as claws.

Everyday, Rowankit did his best to avoid their attention. He'd eat away from them, sleep on the opposite side of the nursery, and stay out of their way. His adopted mother, Olivenose, didn't seem to notice. That, or she didn't care. Rowankit imagined it was the latter.

The clan seemed to like to pretend that he didn't exist. Unless absolutely necessary, no one spoke to him. When he was younger, he used to hear whispers about him, but now his clanmates were more careful around him. They tip-toed around him every single day either with disgust or fear.

Over time, Rowankit learned to ignore the dirty looks they gave him and to pretend that they didn't talk about him behind his back. He grew accustomed to the loneliness and separation. In his dreams, he imagined a different world, one where his mother and dead littermate were alive. He'd often pretend that his mother was secretly alive somewhere and that one day she'd return to him.

Crowkit batted the mossball in his direction and it hit him in the face. Rowankit flinched and scowled at the stupid ball of moss that laid at his paws. He lifted his green gaze to Crowkit. His foster brother sauntered over, a malicious gleam in his eyes.

"Toss it back, *Deathkit*." Crowkit sneered, drawing out the despised nickname. Rowankit winced as he was reminded once again of how his clanmates viewed them.

Rowankit looked down at the mossball between his paws. It was only slightly smaller than his head. His claws appeared and he dug them into the dirt. Why must his foster brother torment him? It wasn't his fault!

Taking the mossball between his teeth, Rowankit hurled it back at his brother as hard as he could. The mossball hit him alongside the head. Lucky for Crowkit, it was soft. Rowankit pinned his ears and bared his fangs at him.

Wrenkit appeared at her brother's side, a scowl pulling at her lips. "You're so sensitive, *Death*kit. Crowkit was just joking around!"

Rowankit turned his back on them and slunk into the shadows. He would *not* show how upset he was, not in front of them. They didn't deserve the satisfaction. Why couldn't they just leave him alone?!

He slipped inside the nursery and sighed with relief when he saw that it was empty. Rowankit staggered over to his lonely nest in the very back corner of the nursery. His paws made a circle in his nest before he curled up and attempted to let his dreams carry him away.

~

"Rowankit! Pass the mossball!" A spunky white she-kit called. Her giggles filled his head and it was musical to his ears.

In the haze of his dream, Rowankit laughed and pounced on the mossball, pinning it beneath his claws. He threw the mossball back towards the white she-kit and their laughter filled the clearing. She caught it and they took turns passing the mossball to the other.

When they bored of the mossball, they wrestled playfully. Rowankit was gentle with her, keeping his claws sheathed and letting her land a few hits. All around them, the camp clearing was empty and covered in bright light. Above their heads, the stars shone brightly.

"Who are you?" Rowankit asked the little she-kit when they took a break from their games. They laid on their backs, looking up at Silverpelt.

She was about to answer when the dream started to fade. The edges of

his vision started to blur and fade into darkness. Her face was the last thing he saw before everything fell away.

~

"Wake up!" Someone prodded his side harshly with a claw. Rowankit started and nearly jumped out of his fur.

Crowkit stood over him with a look of utter disgust on his face. "Skystar called a meeting, although I don't know why anyone wants you there." He slunk out of the nursery, leaving Rowankit on his own.

Pushing himself to his paws, Rowankit emerged from the nursery and had to squint his eyes until they adjusted to the bright sunlight. The clan was gathered around the Tallrock, a tall boulder that jutted out of the sand. It was where the clan leader called meetings.

Rowankit spotted Crowkit and Wrenkit sitting together next to Olivenose. Deep down, he longed to join them, but he knew that would be asking for trouble. The most Olivenose has ever done for him was nurse him when no one else would. He supposed that he should feel grateful to her, but for a she-cat to nurse a newborn kit and not grow attached? He didn't trust her character.

Instead, Rowankit sat on his own near the back. He kept his distance from the warriors and stayed quiet. What was going on? Then he noticed Goldenheart sitting beside her three kits: Wolfkit, Sablekit, and Hollowkit. They were probably being named apprentices.

There was only one cat in the clan that Rowankit hated worse than Crowkit and that was Wolfkit. He's the one that started the bullying, the example that Crowkit followed. Wherever Wolfkit was, Crowkit was right behind him. They were inseparable and seemed to bond over his suffering.

Skystar leaped onto the Tallrock, his blue-gray pelt gleamed in the sunlight. "Cats of HiddenClan, today we make three kits into apprentices." Skystar jumped down from the Tallrock to stand in front of the three kits.

"Wolfkit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Wolfpaw," Skystar announced. "Nightfang, you are a skilled fighter and very loyal. I trust that you will train Wolfpaw in your image." Skystar touched his nose to Wolfpaw's forehead.

"Hollowkit, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Hollowpaw." Skystar's amber eyes searched the clan for one face in particular. "Birchleap, you are an excellent hunter and an even better tracker. I know that you'll train Hollowpaw well." Skystar repeated the same action with Hollowpaw.

Next, Skystar moved his attention to Wolfpaw and Hollowpaw's sister. "Sablekit, until you earn your warrior name, you'll be known as Sablepaw." Skystar nodded to Briarfrost, one of the most beautiful she-cats in the clan. "Briarfrost, you are intelligent and fierce, I hope that you pass on these traits to Sablepaw." Skystar touched Sablepaw's forehead with his nose as the clan began to cheer.

"Wolfpaw! Hollowpaw! Sablepaw!"

Rowankit didn't join in with the cheering. He felt alienated within his own clan all because of something that he couldn't control. At his apprentice ceremony, would even one cat cheer his name?

Chapter 2

[image]

He was in his dreamworld again. Rowankit stood in the forest this time, not in the camp. The forest around him was blurry except for the clearing that he stood in. In the clearing, the sun beat down on his pelt and he felt safe from the shadows that haunted him.

Rowankit opened his jaws to taste the fresh air, to savor the sweet scent of wildflowers and fresh rain. The dirt beneath his paws still felt slightly damp and he wondered how it could rain in his dreamworld. Wasn't it only exactly how he imagined it?

Suddenly, the undergrowth quivered and Rowankit froze in fear. His heart started racing in his chest. The tall grass parted and a white face popped out. It was the same white she-kit from last time!

She purred a greeting and bounced around him excitedly. "I missed you, Rowankit! Why did you have to leave?"

"I'm sorry," He meowed, and he sincerely meant it. "I didn't want to leave." He nosed her white fur and purred. "You never told me your name."

"I don't have one." The white she-kit stopped prancing around and stopped. She lowered her head and avoided his gaze. "Mama never gave me a name."

Rowankit frowned and studied her in a quizzical manner. "What do you mean she never gave you a name? All mothers name their kits!"

She shook her head slowly. "Only if they have the chance to live first."

~

Rowankit opened his green eyes and found himself back in the HiddenClan nursery. Oh no! He'd promised her that he wouldn't leave! Now she was all alone in whatever that place was.

He sat up and tried to come to terms with it. Why didn't she have a name? And what had she meant by "only if they have the chance to live first"? It made no sense!

The nursery was empty except for Starlingwing, the pregnant tortoiseshell queen. She would have her kits any day now, at least that's what he'd overheard the medicine cat, Mistypool, say. Rowankit crept past her and left the nursery.

Outside in the sunshine, Rowankit was reminded of the white she-kit. He pitied her that she didn't have a name. Even *he* had a name and was despised by his entire clan. She seemed stuck in some kind of alternate world all alone. Rowankit didn't think she was in StarClan because then there would be other cats there with her, right?

What if he gave her a name? It might make her happier and then he wouldn't have to keep referring to her as the "white she-kit". Rowankit sat outside the nursery in the shade as he thought about names. He's never had to name another cat, so he had no idea.

Maybe he could ask Mistypool? The medicine cat was probably the one cat in the clan that didn't hate him. She had been there at his kitting and told him many times the story of his mother's death.

Rowankit couldn't blame the clan for hating him. Mistypool described his mother as the most beautiful and beloved she-cat in the clan. Her name was Ivorymoon and she had a snow-white pelt with faint black tabby stripes and striking blue eyes. She was compassionate, friendly, and an excellent warrior.

Mistypool explained that if the clan were like one big family, Ivorymoon was the tiny sister that everyone loved. The one that could do no wrong. Everyone in the clan loved her. She was the darling.

She died because of him. Rowankit took away the clan's beloved darling, their precious sister. It was his fault, everyone said so. He's been told countless times since birth that it was his fault, and now, he was beginning to believe them.

Rowankit pushed away those thoughts and approached the medicine cat den. He poked his head inside and heard Mistypool towards the back. There's been countless nights where Rowankit would seek refuge in Mistypool's presence. Mistypool was about the only cat in the clan whom he trusted.

"Rowankit?" Mistypool came from the shadows, leaves of different herbs sticking to her long-haired gray and white pelt. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I just had a question." Rowankit mewed softly, sitting down before her.

"Alright, ask away." Mistypool settled herself in front of him, ready to listen.

Rowankit hesitated, unsure of how to start. "Well, um, let's say that a white she-kit were to enter the clan, but she had no name. What would be a good name for her?"

Mistypool studied Rowankit skeptically. "Where is this coming from, Rowankit?"

"Nowhere!" He insisted. "This is just a 'what if' situation."

Mistypool sighed and decided to play along. "Um, perhaps Snowkit, Cloudkit, Frostkit?"

A name came to mind, but not one that Mistypool listed. "I've got one! Thanks for the help, Mistypool!" Rowankit jumped to his paws and raced out of the medicine cat den.

He didn't look where he was going, and Rowankit ran straight into Wolfpaw. Rowankit tumbled into the dirt and hit his head. The world was spinning and blurry, but he could barely make out the figure of Wolfpaw standing over him. When his vision cleared, he was looking into the angry eyes of Wolfpaw.

"Watch where you're going, *Deathkit*!" Wolfpaw spat. At his side was his mentor, Nightfang. Rowankit hoped that the black warrior would have the decency to defend him, but Nightfang made no move to discipline Wolfpaw.

Rowankit lowered his green eyes to stare at his paws. "Sorry, Wolfpaw," Rowankit mumbled. "It won't happen again..."

Wolfpaw pounced on Rowankit and he was pinned down by his throat as Wolfpaw's claws pricked at his vulnerable neck. The dark gray apprentice curled his lips back into a snarl. Rowankit squirmed underneath the bigger tom.

"You better watch out, *Deathkit*. You may be protected for now, but when you're an apprentice you'll be fair game." Wolfpaw clawed him across the face.

Rowankit screeched in pain as hot blood seeped from the wound. Wolfpaw bashed Rowankit's head against the hard ground and the world started spinning again. Then it all faded into blackness.

~

Rowankit opened his eyes and sighed in relief when he found himself in his dreamworld. He lay in a warm nest of moss in the nursery and he noticed a presence with him. When he turned his head, he saw the white she-kit sitting nearby.

She jumped to her paws when she saw him awaken. "Rowankit! I was so worried! Are you okay?"

Rowankit nodded even if it wasn't true. He didn't want her to worry. "Someday, I'll be old enough and big enough to defend myself." He promised her gently.

She purred and rubbed her head against his chest. "Why can't you stay here with me forever? I would never hurt you Rowankit, not like you r clanmates. They're supposed to protect you, but instead they cause you pain and fear."

"I just need to prove myself to them," Rowankit reassured her. "They think that I've done something horribly wrong."

She narrowed her blue eyes. "Like what?"

"It doesn't matter," Rowankit murmured even though it did *matter. "Hey! I decided that if you don't have a name, I could give you one?"*

Instantly, her eyes brightened and she sat up straighter. "Really? You'd do that for me?"

Rowankit nodded, "I've already picked it out: Sweetkit."

"I love it," the newly named Sweetkit purred.

~

"Rowankit? Can you hear me?"

Slowly, Rowankit opened his eyes. The world was spotted and blurry, but Rowankit could make out a figure. It was Mistypool, Rowankit realized when he caught her scent.

"Mistypool?" Rowankit moaned. Gradually, his vision started to clear. From the darkness, Rowankit guessed that it was night.

"What happened to you, Rowankit? Who did this to you?" Mistypool demanded.

He should've told her. It could all be done with and Wolfpaw would get what he deserved. But then Rowankit realized how it could turn the entire clan on him and they'd all call for his blood. Rowankit wanted to *earn* the clan's respect, not ruin it completely.

So he lied.

"No one, Mistypool," Rowankit lied, letting out a moan for effect. "I fell and I must've hit my head."

Mistypool studied him as if she didn't believe him. After a while, she sighed and let it go. "You're going to sleep in here for the night,"Mistypool decided.

He nodded and let out a yawn. "Thank you, Mistypool." Then he drifted off to sleep in search of Sweetkit.

Chapter 3

[image]

A half moon passed and Rowankit never told anyone about Wolfpaw. He kept to himself more than ever and relied on his nightly dreams with Sweetkit. She quickly became his closest friend and sometimes he would see wisps of her in the waking world.

Starlingwing had her kits, two she-kits that she and her mate, Pineclaw, named Hazelkit and Lilackit. Wrenkit was obsessed with them and she'd spend time just sitting with Starlingwing while they watched the kits. As for Crowkit, without Wrenkit constantly at his side, he sought Wolfpaw out more.

Rowankit avoided them as best as he could, but every now and then they would call him out. He was forced to go to Mistypool once or twice because they'd claw or bruise him. It left Mistypool to become suspicious, but Rowankit refused to say anything.

Today was no different. The sun beat down on the forest and the heat of sunhigh left most of the clan to stay among the shade. Luckily, the HiddenClan camp was surrounded by tall trees that offered plenty of shade. Warriors slept in the warriors den or at the edge of camp, the apprentices crowded outside of their den, and most of the kits stayed in the nursery.

Rowankit stayed outside the nursery because that's where Crowkit and Wrenkit were. So instead, he laid in the shade just outside of the nursery. Olivenose didn't come to check on him or anything which was normal. Besides, he was just about six moons old. She was beginning to distance herself from him, actually, she's been doing that for moons now.

Suddenly, there was motion at the top of the Tallrock. Rowankit opened his eyes all the way and saw that Skystar was calling a meeting. Yawning, he stood up and stretched before making his way over there.

The clan gathered around and Rowankit found himself in between Goldenheart and Birchleap. He turned his eyes up to Skystar who sat patiently at the top of Tallrock. Gradually, the clan quieted down and Skystar began the meeting.

"Cats of HiddenClan, today we make three kits into apprentices," Skystar announced.

It took Rowankit a moment to realize that Skystar was talking about him, Crowkit, and Wrenkit. He stood up and walked to the base of Tallrock. His eyes found Crowkit and Wrenkit among the crowd. They were being fussed over by Olivenose and Rowankit felt a pang in his heart.

Skystar leaped down once Crowkit and Wrenkit joined him in front of the clan. "Crowkit, Wrenkit, and Rowankit, until you three become warriors, you'll be known as Crowpaw, Wrenpaw, and Rowanpaw."

"Darknight, you are a skilled warrior and incredibly loyal. You'll be mentor to Crowpaw." Skystar mewed, touching his nose to Crowpaw's forehead.

Then, the blue-gray leader turned to Wrenpaw. "Flameheart," an orange tabby she-cat stepped forth from the crowd, "You are determined, brave, and it's time you received your first apprentice. You will mentor Wrenpaw well."

Finally, Skystar turned to Rowanpaw. The clan became hushed and focused their eyes on him. Rowanpaw stood taller and lifted his head to show that he had nothing to be ashamed of. This was his clan, and he deserved to be here.

"Rowanpaw, your mentor will be Ravenwing." Skystar announced, causing a loud uproar from the clan. They shouted curses at him and claimed he shouldn't be apprenticed, among other things. Rowanpaw flinched under their harsh judgement that was finally silenced by Skystar. "My decision is final, Ravenwing will mentor Rowanpaw."

Skystar touched his nose to Rowanpaw's forehead. Rowanpaw felt

excitement course through his veins. He was finally an apprentice! Now he could prove himself to the clan! Maybe, someday, they'd see him as their equal.

Rowanpaw approached Ravenwing, the HiddenClan deputy. He also happened to be the father of Crowpaw and Wrenpaw. Ravenwing was known for being hard to please and cold towards his apprentices. His last apprentice had been Nightfang, the tom now training Wolfpaw. Despite his coldness, he trained excellent warriors and it was an honor to be his apprentice.

Rowanpaw dipped his head to Ravenwing in a show of respect. The black tom looked him up and down. "We start now."

Ravenwing walked through the crowd and they moved out of his way, leaving Rowanpaw to follow meekly behind. They exited through the camp entrance and Rowanpaw immediately breathed in the forest. It had rained yesterday, so the ground was damp and the forest smelled like rain. Rowanpaw's paws found the worn down trail that generations of HiddenClan cats have walked. He felt a part of something bigger than himself.

The trees sighed and swayed in the wind. Sunlight trickled through the thick canopy and spotted the forest floor. Birds and squirrels ruled the trees, flying and leaping from tree to tree. The undergrowth rustled with mice, rabbits, and other small creatures.

Their scents wafted towards Rowanpaw, tempting him to hunt. He unsheathed his claws, wanting desperately to give chase. Then he realized he was falling behind and started running to catch up with his mentor. Even though he wanted to hunt, he could *not* end up on Ravenwing's bad side.

They traveled through the forest, taking lots of twists and turns. Rowanpaw took in all the forest, trying to commit every trail to memory. HiddenClan's territory was mostly forests with thick undergrowth and thickets, but there were parts that were thinner. He even noticed a few meadows and streams.

Rowanpaw's paws were getting tired. He gradually fell behind and had to run every so often to catch up. They had left camp at around

sunhigh and they've been out so long that the sun was slowly descending in the sky. A quiet hush started to fall upon the forest and even the wind slowed down.

He pinned his ears nervously and focused on Ravenwing ahead of him. They just kept traveling farther and farther away from camp. At this pace, they probably wouldn't return until after sunset.

Suddenly, Ravenwing stopped in front of him. The muscular black tom spun around to face Rowanpaw. "This is your first test," Ravenwing meowed, and then he took off.

Rowanpaw attempted to follow his mentor, but with the growing darkness he had no hope of keeping up. Soon, Rowanpaw was forced to stop so he could catch his breath. The sky above the trees turned radiant orange with trails of pink and red. It was sunset and Rowanpaw was all alone in the forest.

~

A/N
Please vote/comment! I'd love to hear what you think so far and your predictions.

Chapter 4

[image]

Rowanpaw roamed the forest, searching for anything that looked familiar. He couldn't smell any trails or borders and the sunlight was fading fast. Panic started to set in as he scrambled around in the darkness. How was he supposed to find his way back?!

He tried to follow Ravenwing's scent, but the deputy's scent was already fading. The world around him grew darker, leaving him with his senses dulled. Through the dark canopy, Rowanpaw could see Silverpelt. His only guiding light came from the stars and the moon.

Rowanpaw tried to find a worn trail, but it seemed no cats came here often. He kept wandering, not sure of which way he should go. Why would Ravenwing leave him out here alone, and at night? Weren't there foxes or badgers or dogs that could attack him? Not to mention rogues or other clan cats. He had no idea how to defend himself!

Every little sound made him jump and the forest seemed to menace him with every turn. The undergrowth pulled and tripped him like hungry claws coming from the earth. Rowanpaw slipped in mud and his red-brown spotted pelt was now completely dark brown. An owl hooted in the distance, making him jump.

"I need to get back to camp, fast!" Rowanpaw muttered to himself.

He felt as if there were eyes watching him from the darkness. Had Ravenwing stayed behind to watch him progress? Rowanpaw wasn't sure that his mentor cared enough to stick around.

Rowanpaw saw a break in the trees up ahead. He slunk forward to get a better look and peered through the undergrowth. Past the tree line, the moors stretched as far as he could see. His fur stood on end from being so close. This must be SwiftClan's territory.

He was about to turn to head back into the forest, when something crashed into him. Rowanpaw was pinned by expert claws and he looked up into the blue eyes of a SwiftClan cat. The cat felt light, probably an apprentice. Her coat was black and white, making her look like a ghost.

"What are you doing on SwiftClan's border?!" The she-cat hissed. She had an intense look in her blue eyes, making them seem cold.

Rowanpaw kicked her off. She couldn't be much older than him, but she seemed to be experienced. "Get off of me! I didn't cross the border!" He growled.

The she-cat circled him, her fur standing on end. She narrowed her cold blue eyes at him. "Then why were you sneaking around?"

"Why were *you* sneaking around?!" Rowanpaw shot back at her. He tried to keep facing her head on, but she was making it a difficult task.

Their fight had taken them out of the forest so now they stood on the moors at the tree line. Nothing stood between them and Silverpelt. In the open, Rowanpaw could study her closer.

She was smaller than a grown cat, but a little bigger than him. That must be because she was older, but not more than two moons, if Rowanpaw had to guess. Most of her body was white with spots splashed across her back and stomach. The front part of her body was completely white, and only one of her legs had any black on it. Her muscles were taunt and rippled underneath her pelt. She still had her claws unsheathed as if she expected him to fight.

"I was only just made an apprentice," Rowanpaw hissed, "Do you really think I'll be able to fight back?" His green irises searched her blue ones for some hint of kindness. So far, she only seemed cold to him.

She cast him a glare with her glinting blue eyes. They were almost electric blue, like a lightning bolt. He became lost in the dark shades of her eyes, entranced by them. Then he realized that he was staring.

"Sorry, I've never met a cat from another clan before." Rowanpaw admitted, sitting down on his rump. He tried to seem calm and collected since she presented such a strong front. "What's your name?"

"Eclipsepaw," She answered cooly, still watching him as if she expected him to attack her.

"I'm Rowanpaw," He told her. Rowanpaw glanced over his shoulder at the dark forest. "I need to head back. Maybe I'll see you at a Gathering or something?"

Slowly, she nodded her head. "Maybe, goodbye Rowanpaw." She spun on her hind legs and took off further into the moors. He watched her go until she completely disappeared.

Rowanpaw turned and headed back into the forest. He felt lighter on his paws and raced through the shadows. By pure chance, he found a worn trail and followed it to what he assumed would be the camp. The trail took many twists and turns, but after a while, he could scent the camp.

He took off running and his heart soared when he recognized the camp. Rowanpaw burst into the camp, panting and weary. After a few deep breaths, Rowanpaw lifted his head to find Ravenwing sitting at the center of the clearing. The black warrior had his tail curled around his front paws and his head raised expectantly.

"You made it," Ravenwing said with no emotion. He stood up and approached Rowanpaw. His nose wrinkled as he surveyed the young apprentice. "Why do you smell of SwiftClan?"

Rowanpaw felt embarrassed that he'd forgotten to clean the scent off. "I accidentally crossed the SwiftClan border," Rowanpaw admitted then added quickly: "But it won't happen again!"

Ravenwing rolled his eyes and started walking towards the warriors den. "Tomorrow morning, bright and early, we start training. If you're late, there will be consequences." Then the black tom disappeared into the den, leaving Rowanpaw standing on his own.

He headed towards the apprentice den and saw that there wasn't a nest for him. Slightly disappointed, Rowanpaw decided to sleep under the stars that night. He half-hoped to visit Sweetkit, but instead, his mind wandered across the border. Rowanpaw envisioned a sleeping Eclipsepaw in her nest, those electric blue eyes of hers closed as she slept.

Chapter 5

[image]

Halfway through the night, it started to rain big fat drops. He was so exhausted that he didn't notice until thunder rumbled overhead and lightning lit up the sky. Rowanpaw was forced to squish in the apprentice den without a nest. His denmates, still half-asleep, moved away from him subconsciously.

By the time morning came, Rowanpaw was still exhausted. He emerged from the den at dawn, his paws dragging as he let out a wide yawn. Last night, Sweetkit didn't visit him. It bothered him a little, but he had bigger things to worry about.

Ravenwing sat by the camp entrance, a look of annoyance on his face. Rowanpaw bounded over and stopped in front of his mentor. He wasn't able to say anything before Ravenwing silently rose to his paws and led Rowanpaw out of camp. The young apprentice tried his hardest to keep up with the swift black warrior.

He was out of breath by the time Ravenwing stopped. They stood before a sandy clearing encircled by bushes. Rowanpaw followed Ravenwing to the center of the clearing. He studied everything about the clearing and wondered if they would practice battle moves.

Suddenly, Ravenwing crashed into him and pinned him down beneath thorn-sharp claws. Thinking quickly, Rowanpaw slipped from his mentor's grasp and attempted to trip Ravenwing in the process. But the black warrior didn't lose his balance and instead spun around for another attack.

Ravenwing slashed Rowanpaw across the face, claws sheathed. The impact sent him feeling back and landing with a loud *thud!* in the dirt. He scrambled to his paws and faced Ravenwing, his sides heaving for breath. The two toms circled each other and Rowanpaw was very careful to not turn his back on Ravenwing.

"Watch me, Rowanpaw!" Ravenwing snarled. "Don't loose focus!" He lunged at Rowanpaw and he barely moved out of the way in time.

In one swift motion, Rowanpaw swung around and managed to land a blow to Ravenwing's shoulder. The black tom became slightly unbalanced and allowed Rowanpaw attempt to hold him down. His weight was nothing in comparison to the large tom, but still, Ravenwing seemed somewhat impressed.

"You fought hard for your first time," Ravenwing meowed, pushing the younger tom off of him. "You're quick-witted, I'll give you that. Go back to camp and have some fresh-kill. Tonight, we're going to play a game."

Rowanpaw dipped his head respectively to Ravenwing before heading back to camp. His pawsteps were silent on the grassy forest floor and his movements were like a shadow. He was used to fading into the background after moons of torment.

When he entered into camp, his clanmates completely ignored him. That wasn't out of the ordinary. Rowanpaw padded up to the fresh-kill pile and picked a juicy mouse. He settled down outside of the apprentice den to eat alone.

Across the camp in the shade, Rowanpaw noticed Wrenpaw sitting with Wolfpaw. At first glance, it seemed like they were two regular cats sharing tongues, but then Rowanpaw saw his foster sister pull away harshly. He saw Wolfpaw lash out at Wrenpaw, pushing her to the ground only to stand over her. They were in the shadows, hidden from the rest of the oblivious clan.

Rowanpaw leaped to his paws and dashed across camp to collide with the heavier, stronger apprentice. Despite the size difference, Rowanpaw successfully pinned Wolfpaw down beneath him. He bared his fangs at the older apprentice angrily.

"Leave Wrenpaw alone!" Rowanpaw snarled.

Wolfpaw kicked Rowanpaw off of him and slashed his claws across his face. Gasping, Rowanpaw doubled over in pain. That gave Wolfpaw the opportunity to pin him.

The dark gray tom stood over Rowanpaw, teeth bared and claws unsheathed. "Don't you *dare* tell me what to do *Death*paw!" Wolfpaw hissed. "You have no right to tell anyone what to do!"

"Leave him alone, Wolfpaw," Wrenpaw whined, pulling at Wolfpaw. "He's learnt his lesson."

Wolfpaw growled and slashed Rowanpaw across the face one more time. Then he bent down to whisper something into his ear. "My business with your foster sister is outside of your control. One day, she'll be my mate and bear my kits and there's *nothing* you can do to stop me!" Wolfpaw spit on his face before getting up and sauntering to Wrenpaw. "Come on Wrenpaw." He called.

Wrenpaw met Rowanpaw's gaze sadly and opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something. But then Wolfpaw called her again and she scampered away. Rowanpaw watched her go, laying in a pool of his own blood. Maybe he would never be big enough to defend himself.

Suddenly, Mistypool was at his side. She offered him her shoulder to lean on and together they made their way back to the medicine cat den. In the privacy of the den, Mistypool asked Rowanpaw the question she's been dying to ask him for moons.

"Was it Wolfpaw? All those times you came into my den bloodied and beaten, was it Wolfpaw?" Mistypool's tone left no room for lies. She was demanding an answer.

Slowly, Rowanpaw nodded. He had hoped to keep the secret even longer. Now he feared that Mistypool would tell Skystar. Somehow, the clan would pin this on him, making Wolfpaw look innocent. Would Wrenpaw tell the clan the truth? He doubted it, even after the way Wolfpaw treated her.

"Why wouldn't you tell anyone, Rowanpaw?" Mistypool demanded, anger in her eyes. But he saw that the anger guarded sympathy and disappointment. "I had hoped that you would trust me enough to tell me these things."

"I don't trust anyone!" Rowanpaw growled. "How can I when no one

trusts me? The heartbeat that I place my trust in someone, they betray me! The clan hates me."

Mistypool stared at him with sad eyes and a heavy heart. "Rowanpaw...they just don't understand. They weren't there the day you were born. Do you know what your mother would say if she were here right now?" He shook his head. "She would say that it's not your fault. What happened was an accident. Kitting can be very dangerous and it happens sometimes."

"Well, how do I get others to trust me?" He wondered bitterly.

The gray and white she-cat lifted his chin with her tail. "You train harder than ever and learn the Warrior Code. In time, they'll see you for who you really are: an innocent, intelligent cat."

Then, the old medicine cat cleaned his wounds and applied a dock poultice to his wounds before wrapping them in cobwebs. She sent him on his way with a poppy seed for the pain. Before he left, Mistypool touched her paw to him and was instantly froze.

Rowanpaw watched in horror as a blank expression came over her and her eyes became blank. He was frozen in place, wondering what was happening to her. Was she having a vision?

Suddenly, Mistypool convulsed and then drew in a deep breath. She coughed and looked up at the scared tom. "Blood will rain from StarClan and darkness will rise. No one is safe."

"W-what do you mean, Mistypool?" His voice quivered.

Mistypool blinked and the trance was gone. She stared at Rowanpaw with fear, confusion, and sorrow. "Return to your nest, Rowanpaw. Ravenwing needs you well for training tonight." The feeble medicine cat turned and started to sort through a pile of herbs.

Rowanpaw backed out of the den and stumbled across camp. Cats stared, but he ignored them. He entered the apprentice den and curled up in his nest. What had happened to Mistypool? Had she seen something about him? He fell into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter 6

[image]

Night fell over camp and Rowanpaw was shaken awake by someone. Already on edge, he jumped and lashed out at whoever prodded him. His claws narrowly missed Sablepaw's face. The cream-colored she-cat flattened her ears and hissed.

"Watch it! I've only woken you to tell you it's time to go." Sablepaw growled and turned her back on him to leave the den.

After a deep breath, Rowanpaw followed Sablepaw outside the apprentice den. He saw, in amazement, that all the apprentices sat at the center of camp with their mentors: Wolfpaw with Nightfang, Hollowpaw with Birchleap, Sablepaw with Briarfrost, Crowpaw with Darknight, and Wrenpaw with Flameheart. Rowanpaw padded over to where Ravenwing waited.

At the head of the group was Skystar himself. "Tonight we will be playing a war game of sorts. This game is a tradition in HiddenClan and countless generations of apprentices have played this game at least once during their apprenticeship. I will split the apprentices into two groups and their mentors will be in the opposite group as them. The object of the game is to 'claim' the other team's base. If a cat is tagged, they're dead."

Skystar's amber eyes surveyed the crowd of apprentices. "The first team will be Wolfpaw, Sablepaw, and Rowanpaw. The second team will be Hollowpaw, Crowpaw, and Wrenpaw. Mentors join the opposite team in which your apprentice is a part of." Rowanpaw knew this meant they would have Birchleap, Darknight, and Flameheart on their team.

"Wolfpaw's team, your base is the Hollow Tree," Skystar announced and Rowanpaw envisioned the tall, hollow tree near the RainClan border. "Hollowpaw's team, your base is Boulder Hill." This time, Rowanpaw pictured the pile of boulders near the SwiftClan camp. They were on opposite sides of the territory!

"The first team to tag their opponent's base, wins." Skystar announced. "Keep claws sheathed, this is only a game. Take a few seconds to converse with your team and then we'll begin."

Rowanpaw turned to Wolfpaw and Sablepaw, hating that he was partnered with his bully. "So what are we going to do?" Sablepaw meowed softly.

"Well, which of us is the fastest?" Wolfpaw wondered, his eyes turning to his sister. "Probably you, Sablepaw. I'll go and protect the base with Birchleap and Darknight. You go with Flameheart and Rowanpaw. One of you ought to be able to tag Boulder Hill."

Skystar suddenly yowled, the signal for the game to begin. Cats shot off into the night, heading in different directions. Rowanpaw saw Wolfpaw slip away with Birchleap and Darknight on his paws. "Let's go," Sablepaw hissed to him and Flameheart.

The three of them dashed off into the forest towards the SwiftClan border. "Scatter!" Sablepaw ordered. "We'll be harder to catch that way!"

Rowanpaw disappeared into the shadows, doing what he always does best. He became a shadow himself and raced amongst the darkness. Sablepaw and Flameheart disappeared too and he couldn't see the two she-cats anywhere. To his right, Rowanpaw heard someone coming up on his shoulder.

The red-brown spotted tom dodged to the side, completely missing Wrenpaw's reach. He spun around and tagged her himself, meaning she was "dead". Rowanpaw continued onward. The darkness was comforting and allowed him to broaden his senses. All around him, the trees blurred as he zipped past.

He heard Flameheart yowl in the distance, probably caught off guard when she was tagged. Now it was just him and Sablepaw. Rowanpaw ran faster and lengthened his stride. He weaved in and out of the undergrowth, slipping past trees. Nothing could stop him!

"Ow!" Rowanpaw heard Sablepaw growl, probably knocked over after being tagged. He was the last one standing.

Boulder Hill came into view, and Rowanpaw wondered how he could possibly get close enough without being spotted. He needed to be within a good distance so he could strike without being seen until it was too late. Rowanpaw decided to rely on his senses.

He made himself small and slipped quietly from shadow to shadow. The wind blew towards him, carrying his scent in the opposite direction. Rowanpaw spotted Crowpaw, Ravenwing, and Nightfang. Briarnose, Hollowpaw, and Wrenpaw must be heading for Hollow Tree.

He crawled forward completely undetected. Just a little further and he could sprint to Boulder Hill before being tagged. Rowanpaw felt a deep desire to win, to prove to his teammates that he was able of being a worthy clan cat.

Boulder Hill stood tall and bright under the moonlight. It consisted of at least a dozen boulders piled together. Rowanpaw knew that this place was a popular place to hunt for mice and rabbits. Sometimes warriors even sunned here.

Rowanpaw bunched his haunches beneath him, ready to spring... Suddenly, he lunged forward with all his might. Crowpaw, Ravenwing, and Nightfang all scrambled to tag him, but it was too late. Rowanpaw's paw connected with the stone and he felt a glimmer of triumph.

"Good job, Rowanpaw," Ravenwing praised him. It surprised Rowanpaw, but he didn't argue. Ravenwing was the father of Crowpaw and Wrenpaw, and in a small way, he was Rowanpaw's father too. At least he admitted Rowanpaw's existence whereas Olivenose completely ignored him.

Rowanpaw lifted his head proudly. The game was over, and he won it. Maybe now his clanmates would start to accept him?

Chapter 7

[image]

A few days passed, and Rowanpaw spent those days training harder than any of the other apprentices. He had nothing to loose and everything to gain. In the mornings, he either went on the dawn patrol or hunting. No apprentice worked harder than him.

His kit-fluff was gone now and the sleek coat of a grown cat replaced it. Rowanpaw's muscles became stronger and his body broadened and lengthened. He was taller now, even taller than Crowpaw. His foster brother tried to deny that Rowanpaw was stronger, but it was hard to do so.

Rowanpaw managed to hold his head a little higher. It felt great to feel proud. The clan was still weary of him, but at least now they acted like he existed. He actually grew quite fond of Sablepaw and Hollowpaw, they were nothing like their brother, Wolfpaw. Sablepaw could be snappish, but once in a while her eyes were alight with kindness. As for Hollowpaw, he was quiet and content listening.

Starlingwing's kits, Hazelkit and Lilackit, were becoming more adventurous every day, especially little Hazelkit. She was small but quick-witted and focused. Lilackit spent most of her spare time in the medicine cat den with Mistypool, and it was clear who she would be apprenticed to.

For some odd reason, Hazelkit liked to follow him around, much to Wrenpaw's disapproval. The tortoiseshell and white she-kit always sought him out whenever he wasn't training. It confused him immensely, but he didn't oppose to it. Soon enough, she would learn of what he did and become indifferent to him like the rest of the clan.

Rowanpaw woke early that morning and padded for the fresh-kill pile. He was supposed to go hunting with Ravenwing, Ashcloud, and Pineclaw. The pile was diminished to only two mice and a

squirrel. Rowanpaw picked the squirrel and settled at the edge of camp to eat.

"Rowanpaw!" A small voice squealed with excitement. He looked up to see Hazelkit barreling towards him. Without warning, she launched herself at him and landed squarely on his shoulders.

"Oof!" Rowanpaw gasped for air. "You're getting big, Hazelkit!"

She giggled and Rowanpaw compared it to the musical sound of wind weaving through grass. Her hazel eyes shone bright and she settled beside him. In certain light, her eyes looked more green than hazel, but most of the time it was obvious.

"What are you doing today?" Hazelkit asked him in a small voice. She looked up at him in anticipation as if she expected him to stay back in camp with her.

"I'm going hunting and then later I'll probably practice my battle moves." Rowanpaw let her down gently.

Crestfallen, Hazelkit lowered her head and sighed. "Oh, okay. Why can't you stay here with me? You could teach *me* battle moves!"

Rowanpaw huffed at her innocence. "I would love to, Hazelkit, but I can't."

Hazelkit pouted, "Pleas-" She was cut off when Starlingwing emerged from the nursery calling her name. Hazelkit winced and stood up. "I gotta go!" Then she bounded off to her mother.

He watched the tortoiseshell queen say something to Hazelkit in a secretive manner. Rowanpaw could only imagine the horrible things she was saying about him. Letting out a long sigh, he finished his squirrel in silence.

"Rowanpaw!" Ravenwing called from the other side of camp. "We're leaving, hurry up and finish that squirrel!"

He gulped down the last morsel and ran to catch up with Ravenwing, Ashcloud, and Pineclaw. His claws itched to hunt but his mind kept wandering back to little, Hazelkit, his only light in

these dark days.

~

The day was a busy one. On hunting patrol, Rowanpaw caught a rabbit, two squirrels, a thrush, and three mice. Ravenwing seemed very impressed which made Rowanpaw feel proud. He napped most of midday and then went out for more battle training with Ravenwing, Briarfrost, and Sablepaw.

When he returned to camp, he avoided Wolfpaw, Crowpaw, and Wrenpaw whom all seemed preoccupied. Rowanpaw slipped to the shadows to watch the clan in quiet tranquility. A flicker of motion at the mouth of the nursery warned Rowanpaw that he might get company.

He watched in amusement as Hazelkit attempted to sneak up on him. Rowanpaw pretended not to see her. She leaped and aimed for his shoulders. The tortoiseshell kit fell into him instead, knocking the breath from his lungs.

"Oops, sorry Rowanpaw," Hazelkit giggled. She slid off of his back and sat beside him. "Today was so boring without you! All Lilackit wanted to do was visit the medicine cat den, but that's *sooo* boring!" She drawled with a whine.

Rowanpaw did feel a bit sorry for her. Hazelkit and Lilackit were the only kits in the nursery at the moment and if Lilackit didn't want to play, Hazelkit was out of luck. "You could always visit Fernshade. She tells good stories and might share a mouse if you bring her one." What he didn't tell the little she-kit was that Fernshade was his mother's mother, making them kin.

Hazelkit was about to reply when Skystar appeared at the top of Tallrock. The clan leader yowled, calling a clan meeting. Rowanpaw stood up and started to walk over with Hazelkit on his heels.

"Can I sit with you, Rowanpaw?" Hazelkit wondered, eyes wide.

He couldn't turn her away, so he nodded. Together they sat near the back with a clear view of the Tallrock. Skystar sat up there proudly,

the sun gleaming off of his blue-gray pelt. His amber eyes reflected the sunlight which made them appear fire-filled.

"Cats of HiddenClan, Ashcloud will be staying in the nursery, expecting Thrushfeather's kits." Skystar announced which was followed by many murmurs of congratulations. "Also, the Gathering is tomorrow night. With me, I would like to bring Ravenwing, Mistypool, Raccoontail, Darknight, Birchleap, Flameheart, Nightfang, Briarfrost, Wolfpaw, Sablepaw, Hollowpaw, Crowpaw, Wrenpaw, and Rowanpaw."

Rowanpaw sat up straighter upon hearing his name. He would be going to the Gathering?! Excitement bubbled in his chest and Hazelkit squealed. "I wish I were going!" She said wistfully.

"You'll get your turn," Rowanpaw promised her. But for now, he would be going. He wondered momentarily if he would see Eclipsepaw, but then shook away those thoughts. She could never been anything more than an acquaintance.

~

A/N

Please vote/comment!

Chapter 8

[image]

Rowanpaw sat distanced from the other apprentices as they awaited orders from Skystar or their mentors. They all waited in anticipation, this being the first time any of them will go to a Gathering. Wrenpaw sat very close to Wolfpaw and it drove Rowanpaw crazy. How did it not bother Crowpaw? It worried Rowanpaw and she wasn't even his real sister; he had no reason to care.

He didn't understand how Wrenpaw could let Wolfpaw hang on her, touch her so possessively. Rowanpaw stared at Wrenpaw and she glanced at him for no more than a heartbeat before looking away. His blood boiled at the triumphant look Wolfpaw shot him.

Rowanpaw distracted his attention to Starlingwing who ushered Hazelkit back into the nursery for the umpteenth time that night. Hazelkit kept sneaking out in the hopes of following them to the Gathering. He couldn't help not chuckling at her antics. She would become a sharp-witted warrior one day.

Skystar appeared from the den beneath Tallrock and sauntered over to stand before his clanmates. "To Moonhollow!" The clan raced out of camp like a tidal wave, following their blue-gray leader.

Moonhollow was the name of their Gathering place. It was at the center where all three clan territories came together. Most of the clearing was surrounded by a wall of rock that arched overhead. A shallow stream slipped over the edge and fell into a pool of moonlit water. At the center of the pool was a large stone where the leaders sat to give clan news. There was only one entrance and the ground was sandy.

Rowanpaw was snapped from his thoughts when Hollowpaw fell back to run alongside him. The pale ginger tabby tom cast him a look. "Are you alright? You seem to have something on your mind."

Hollowpaw had quickly become his only friend. He had more compassion than his fox-hearted brother, Wolfpaw. The tom didn't speak much unless he had something to say.

Rowanpaw shook his head, "I'm just excited to be at the Gathering." It was a true statement, his heart was racing in anticipation.

The clan weaved through the trees, moving silently like Wisps, the echo of disturbed cats from stories told to kits to keep them from leaving the nursery at night. Through the thick tree canopy, the moon and Silverpelt shone brightly, faintly illuminating the forest. The forest was bathed in the silver light, making it a place of shadows.

It was a good thing that Ravenwing trained Rowanpaw hard because the clan didn't pause as they ran. Their paws thrummed against the earth, creating a beat in which their hearts followed. Rowanpaw's heart expanded, filling with adrenaline. HiddenClan was an unstoppable force in the night.

The trees started to thin and at the end of the tree line, the clan paused. Before them the ground dipped down into a shallow hollow. Cats could be seen milling around in Moonhollow which looked even more impressive under the moonlight. Rowanpaw studied how the stone seemed to rise up from the ground to create a sort of half-dome. The stream trickled over the edge, filling the moonlit pool.

Skystar moved out with the clan falling into step behind him. Rowanpaw stuck close to Hollowpaw and Sablepaw came to join them. HiddenClan stood taller and prouder in the presence of the other clans. They slipped through the narrow entrance between two walls of stone. RainClan and SwiftClan were already here.

Almost immediately, the clan broke off and mingled with cats from the other clans. Rowanpaw lost Hollowpaw and Sablepaw among the crowd. He searched desperately for them, but to no avail. Growling with frustration, he decided to just walk around and observe. After all, it's what he was good at.

He noticed Wolfpaw, Crowpaw, and Wrenpaw mingling with some

older apprentices from RainClan. As he passed, Wolfpaw lunged and shoved Rowanpaw. Caught off guard, Rowanpaw tumbled into another cat, completely falling on top of them.

"Great StarClan!" Rowanpaw gasped, trying to find his paws which were tangled with the other cat's. "I'm so sorry!" He suddenly realized who he was tangled with...it was Eclipsepaw. The black and white she-cat glared at him. Rowanpaw still lay on top of her, their faces only a whisker-length apart.

"Are you always this clumsy?" Eclipsepaw growled, but Rowanpaw caught a glint of amusement in her blue eyes.

Rowanpaw managed to climb off of her and she sat up. They faced each other, the both of them still embarrassed. The cats around them returned to their own business but Wolfpaw still glared at Rowanpaw.

"I'm so sorry! I was shoved and I was caught off guard so I fell and I guess that was you but you already knew that, right?" Rowanpaw's pelt felt hot with embarrassment. He needed to shut his mouth and stop rambling on!

Surprisingly, Eclipsepaw purred with amusement. "It's okay, Rowanpaw. I was bored to death anyways."

A yowl split the air and all attention turned towards the Moonlitstone. The three clan leaders sat in a line facing the clan cats, their fur bathed in silver moonlight. Rowanpaw settled down beside Eclipsepaw, and he hoped that she wouldn't mind.

Hawkstar from SwiftClan stood up, his dark tabby pelt lighter under the moon. "The rabbits are running and SwiftClan is preparing well for leaf-bare. Russetlight has had three healthy kits who she and Falconeye have named Amberkit, Snowkit, and Kestrelkit. SwiftClan also has three new apprentices: Gentlepaw, Vinepaw, and Fogpaw."

"Gentlepaw! Vinepaw! Fogpaw!" All the cats in Moonhollow cheered.

Next came Brookstar. The RainClan leader stood tall and proud, her

silver tabby pelt illuminated under the moonlight. "RainClan's rivers are full of fish and plenty of forest prey run through our woods. Roseflight is expecting Darkwater's kits and has moved into the nursery. Mosspaw has been named a warrior and she is now Mossbreeze. Frostpaw has also been apprenticed to Pebblestream."

"Mossbreeze! Frostpaw!" The clans cheered again. Rowanpaw wondered if they would cheer for him, too.

Now it was Skystar's turn. Rowanpaw turned his green eyes up to his leader in anticipation. "HiddenClan is well and prey is running. Ashcloud has moved into the nursery expecting Thrushfeather's kits. We have three new apprentices: Crowpaw, Wrenpaw, and Rowanpaw."

"Crowpaw! Wrenpaw! Rowanpaw!"

The clans started to break up and head in their different directions. "Goodbye, Eclipsepaw," Rowanpaw meowed. She waved her tail in farewell before heading off to find SwiftClan.

Rowanpaw finally found Hollowpaw and Sablepaw sitting with the other apprentices. He ignored Wolflaw who he knew was giving him a mean look. Instead, he listened to Hollowpaw and Sablepaw talk about the conversations they had.

Skystar appeared at the front of the clan and they headed back to camp.

Chapter 9

[image]

Skystar led the clan into camp, all of them tired but excited. Most of the warriors heaved off to their nests, as did the apprentices. Wolfpaw and Wrenpaw slipped out of camp unnoticed except by Rowanpaw. He wobbled from exhaustion, his deprived sleep catching up with him. He was about to slip into the den when Starlingwing appeared at the camp entrance, a wild look in her eyes.

"Skystar!" Starlingwing called in distress. She raced up to the blue-gray tom with a look of anxiety on her face. "Skystar, Hazelkit is missing!"

Pineclaw entered the camp after his distraught mate. The brown tabby tom looked worried too, but he seemed to be trying to keep his emotions in check for Starlingwing. Rowanpaw crept closer to hear what they were saying.

"When was she last seen?" Skystar wondered worriedly.

"Well, it was soon before you left to go the Gathering. I curled up to sleep with her and Likackit in our nest." Starlingwing's amber eyes were wide with fear. "I woke up just now and she was gone! Pineclaw and I tried to follow her trail but it disappears!"

Skystar nodded in understanding. "I see..." He walked off to the warriors den and poked his head inside. Rowanpaw stayed hidden in the shadows, watching the events unfold. When Skystar returned, he was followed by Ravenwing, Thrushfeather, Raccoontail, Birchleap, and Goldenheart.

"Ravenwing, you take Thrushfeather, Birchleap, and Goldenheart. Search everywhere between here and the RainClan border," Skystar ordered. "I'll take Pineclaw, Starlingwing, and Raccoontail to check everything from here to SwiftClan." His amber eyes met Starlingwing's. "We'll find her, Starlingwing."

Ashcloud emerged from the nursery and approached Starlingwing. "I'll keep an eye on Lilackit." Starlingwing shot the other queen a grateful look.

The two patrols headed out into the night. Rowanpaw was exhausted, but he couldn't go to sleep until he knew that Hazelkit was safe. He raced out of camp with only the moonlight as his guide. The darkness of the forest made it seem more forlorn and menacing.

Like Starlingwing said, the trail ended not far out and Rowanpaw felt very helpless. How was anyone supposed to find Hazelkit if there was no scent trail? He would die if something happened to Hazelkit. Rowanpaw desperately searched for the scent but all he could smell was a brewing storm.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rowanpaw saw a flicker of motion. He spun around, hoping with all of his heart that it was Hazelkit. But all he saw was a white blur. Then, he heard laughter. Rowanpaw flattened his ears, feeling uneasy at first, but then a voice entered his head.

'*Follow me, Rowanpaw. I know where she is.*' He recognized the voice as Sweetkit.

Without thinking, Rowanpaw followed Sweetkit. He hasn't seen her in his dreams for a few nights, but he still trusted her. After all, when he had no friends she was there for him.

Rain started to fall, gently at first, but then it pounded against the ground. Rowanpaw flattened his ears and tried to stay under the cover of the trees. His pelt was thoroughly soaked but it was the least of his problems.

"The rain's washing away the trail!" Rowanpaw called to Sweetkit who was only a pale shimmering shape.

'*I don't need a trail. I know where she is*.' Sweetkit sped up and Rowanpaw followed her. They zipped past the trees, weaving amongst the undergrowth. He hoped that he could trust Sweetkit.

Suddenly, Sweetkit stopped. She turned at stared at Rowanpaw with her big blue eyes. Her shape was nearly transparent. '*She's in the Hollow Tree*.' Then Sweetkit's shape shimmered out of existence.

Rowanpaw saw the Hollow Tree, a tall dead tree that was hollow on the inside. It's been standing for countless generations. Perhaps Hazelkit had sought out shelter in there. He hurried through the undergrowth and approached the HollowTree.

"Hazelkit? Hazelkit!" He called out desperately. She *had* to be here. "Hazelkit?!"

A weak mewl came from inside the Hollow Tree. At the base of the tree was a split barely big enough for him. Rowanpaw slipped inside, scratching his pelt in the process. Laying in a pile of dead leaves was Hazelkit.

The little tortoiseshell she-kit was curled in a ball but raised her head when Rowanpaw entered. "Rowanpaw?" She squeaked. Without another moment to spare, she flung herself at him and buried herself in his soaked chest fur. "I was so scared! I tried to go to the Gathering but then I got lost.."

"It's okay, Hazelkit," He reassured her. "I've got you."

Rowanpaw picked her up by the scruff and began to carry her back to camp.

~

When they returned, they found the patrols already returned. Starlingwing was sobbing into Pineclaw's shoulder while Goldenheart attempted to comfort them. Rowanpaw walked into camp with a whimpering Hazelkit in his jaws.

The clan stared in shock and amazement. "Mama?" Hazelkit mewled when she saw Starlingwing.

The tortoiseshell queen gasped and raced over with Pineclaw at her side. Rowanpaw set Hazelkit down who leaped into her parents' embrace. He watched them happily and tried to shake some of the rain from his pelt. Skystar and Ravenwing both approached him

looking pleased.

"You did well, Rowanpaw," Skystar gave him a nod.

"But you shouldn't have left camp alone," Ravenwing scolded him. "We can discuss punishment in the morning."

"Punishment?" Starlingwing gasped in surprise. "There is no reason under Silverpelt why Rowanpaw should be punished. He saved Hazelkit!"

"You're a hero, Rowanpaw!" Hazelkit purred weakly.

"Yes," Skystar purred with amusement. "A hero. Why don't you go to your nest, Rowanpaw? It's late enough."

Rowanpaw nodded and eagerly went to find his nest. He curled up in his warm nest and quickly fell asleep.

Chapter 10

[image]

Rowanpaw walked through his Dreamscape, he quickly realized. The world around him was blurry except for the clearing in which he stood. A chill hung in the air and a swift breeze wove through the trees. His green eyes searched the clearing for Sweetkit. He needed to thank her for helping him find Hazelkit.

"Sweetkit?" He called as he wandered the clearing.

She appeared from the forest and seemed surprised to see him. "You came? I haven't seen you in days." The white she-cat walked towards him with a sad look. "You never come anymore..."

"I'm sorry, Sweetkit." He murmured. "I've been busy with training and I don't have very much extra time."

"But you have time to play around with that kit?" Sweetkit's normally gentle blue eyes filled with anger. "I stood by you when no one else did! And now you've got friends, alive *friends, and suddenly you're too good for me?!"*

"It's not like that at all!" Rowanpaw argued. He sighed and looked at her with worried green eyes. "Who are you, Sweetkit, really?"

Sweetkit didn't say anything for a few moments. She seemed caught up in some kind of trance. Then she snapped out of it and answered him. "Don't you know? Rowanpaw, I'm your sister. While you got to live, I never had the chance to be born. Our mother died first."

Rowanpaw stared at her in complete shock. "Sweetkit, why aren't you in StarClan? Instead, you're in this limbo world."

Suddenly, a smirk pulled at Sweetkit's lips. "But who would look out for you?"

Then the dream started to fade and Sweetkit was fading fast. He wanted

to say thank you, but she was gone before he could.

~

Rowanpaw woke and realized that it must be at least sunhigh. Quickly, he scrambled out of his nest and slipped out of the den. The sun was too bright and he had to squint to see anything. Strangely, he saw Ravenwing sitting beside the Tallrock conversing with Skystar. Wasn't he upset that Rowanpaw slept in?

"Good morning, sleepyhead." Sablepaw meowed which caught him off guard. "Oh, jumpy are we?" Her whiskers twitched with amusement. She laid near the mouth of the apprentice den in the shade.

"It's sunhigh?" Rowanpaw asked her.

Sablepaw rolled her green eyes at him. "It sure is, look at the sun."

Rowanpaw felt pressed with anxiety. "Ravenwing is probably very angry since I slept in," He muttered to himself.

"Actually, Ravenwing told all us apprentices to let you sleep," Sablepaw told him with a purr. "Sounds like you had quite the adventure last night?"

Rowanpaw noticed Starlingwing emerge from the medicine cat den and he suddenly felt sick to his stomach. "Is Hazelkit okay?"

Sablepaw stretched out her front legs and let out a yawn. "As far as I know she just has a cough. After all, she was out in the rain."

"Thanks Sablepaw," Rowanpaw meowed before padding away. He crossed the clearing and ducked into the medicine cat den. It was dim in the den and he had to pause a moment to let his eyes adjust.

"Rowanpaw?" Mistypool purred, "What a pleasant surprise! Do you feel alright?"

He nodded as his eyes fell on Hazelkit's sleeping form. "I'm fine, I just had to come and check on her. Is she alright?"

"She'll be fine," Mistypool promised. Her gaze found the tortoiseshell she-kit. "She's lucky you found her, Rowanpaw, or we would be having a very different conversation."

Rowanpaw's gaze softened as he watched her flank rise and fall with breath. She looked so small and dainty, so breakable. He knew that he would always protect her, but he didn't know why. They weren't kin but she was his friend. He'd do anything for her.

"I'd better go find Ravenwing," Rowanpaw told Mistypool. "I'll come and check on her later."

"Maybe she'll be awake by then?" Mistypool teased.

Rowanpaw backed out of the den and his eyes immediately searched for Ravenwing. The black warrior was still talking with Skystar and he didn't want to interrupt. So instead he grabbed a mouse off of the fresh-kill pile. He started walking towards the apprentice den when Wolfpaw entered the camp.

The dark gray tom looked angry and naturally Rowanpaw shied away from him. He's experienced too many claw swipes at his paws. Wolfpaw glared at Rowanpaw as he passed and gave him a shove.

"Stop staring, *Death*paw!" Wolfpaw snarled before disappearing into the den.

Rowanpaw glanced at the camp entrance and saw Wrenpaw walk in. Something about her was different, but he couldn't say what. She looked deeply upset and despite all the times she bullied him, he wanted to comfort her. He dropped the mouse where he stood and approached her cautiously.

"Wrenpaw? Are you alright?" Rowanpaw murmured softly, still scared she might lash out at him.

The brown and white tabby she-cat was shaking. What did Wolfpaw do to her?! Crowpaw entered the camp with his mentor, Darknight. He saw how distraught Wrenpaw looked and set down his prey.

"What's wrong, Wrenpaw?" Crowpaw asked more urgently.

Wrenpaw sniffled and looked up at the both of them. "I-I'm expecting kits... They're Wolfpaw's but he doesn't want anything to do with them..." She whimpered and lowered her head.

Rage came over Rowanpaw like a storm. He was tired of the way Wolfpaw treated everyone. Without thinking, Rowanpaw charged across the clearing to the apprentice den. He found the dark gray tom lying inside the den and grabbed him by the scruff.

Snarling, Wolfpaw lashed out and got Rowanpaw in the cheek. He ignored the sting and dragged Wolfpaw from his nest and out into the open. Wrenpaw and Crowpaw watched in horror while Sablepaw looked surprised. The heads of the clan turned to watch in curiosity.

"Why'd you hurt her?!" Rowanpaw demanded, standing over Wolfpaw. "Why must you hurt everyone you touch?" The rage that Rowanpaw's been hiding from everyone, even himself, broke through and directed his actions.

Wolfpaw has been picking him since day one. The scratches, the bruises... He's never told anyone, never gone looking for revenge. Rowanpaw thought that staying quiet would make the clan like him, make them see him as cool and collected. But this has been going on long enough and now Wrenpaw was dragged into this.

Rowanpaw slashed his claws across Wolfpaw's face and the dark gray tom hissed with anger. Wolfpaw kicked out with his back legs and sent Rowanpaw flying into the dirt. He scrambled to find his paws and faced Wolfpaw. They circled each other, snarling.

"Stop them!" Wrenpaw screeched.

"Cut it out!" Crowpaw called. Ravenwing and Nightfang started towards them, but Rowanpaw was too quick.

He lunged at Wolfpaw and clawed him a few times. Blood oozed down Wolfpaw's gray pelt and stained Rowanpaw's claws. Anger blinded him and he had to be pulled off of Wolfpaw by Ravenwing. His mentor pinned him down while Nightfang pinned Wolfpaw.

"What's the meaning of this?!" Skystar demanded.

Rowanpaw didn't answer, he just shot Wolfpaw a look filled with hate. He finally fought back, and now he would pay the price.

Allegiances Updated

HiddenClan
Leader-Skystar: blue-gray tom with amber eyes
Deputy-Ravenwing: black tom with a white chest
Medicine Cat-Mistypool: gray and white tabby she-cat
Warriors-
-Thrushfeather: golden-brown tom with dark flecks
-Raccoontail: long-haired gray she-cat with a black face and two tail rings
-Darknight: dark brown tabby tom
-Olivenose: dark brown she-cat with green eyes
-Birchleap: pale gray tom with black stripes
-Goldenheart: golden tabby she-cat with white paws
-Pineclaw: strong brown tabby tom
-Flameheart: orange tabby she-cat with amber eyes
-Nightfang: black tom with amber eyes
-Briarfrost: beautiful ginger, gray, and white tabby she-cat with green eyes
Apprentices-
-Wolfpaw: dark gray tom with white points (mentor: Nightfang)
-Sablepaw: cream-colored she-cat (mentor: Briarfrost)
-Hollowpaw: pale ginger tabby tom (mentor: Birchleap)
-Crowpaw: dusty black tom (mentor: Darknight)
-Rowanpaw: red-brown tom with spotted tabby markings and green eyes (mentor: Ravenwing)
Queens-
-Ashcloud: long-haired gray she-cat (expecting Thrushfeather's kits)
-Starlingwing: tortoiseshell she-cat (mother to Pineclaw's kits: Hazelkit and Lilackit)
-Wrenpaw: brown and white tabby she-cat (expecting Wolfpaw's kits)
Kits-
-Hazelkit: tortoiseshell and white she-kit with hazel eyes (mother: Starlingwing)
-Lilackit: pale brown tabby she-kit with blue eyes (mother: Starlingwing)

Elders-
-Fernshade: light brown tabby she-cat

RainClan
Leader-Brookstar: light gray tabby she-cat with green eyes
Deputy-Darkwater: dark gray tom with amber eyes
Medicine Cat-Quietrain: blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes
Warriors-
-Marshfur: brown and white tabby tom
-Pebblestream: gray she-cat with darker flecks
-Toadleap: light brown tabby tom
-Ivysplash: silver tabby she-cat with black stripes
-Willowsong: long-haired brown and white tabby she-cat
-Foxtooth: russet tom with black paws
-Daisypetal: cream-colored she-cat
-Sunspots: white tom with ginger patches
-Mossbreeze: lithe black she-cat with green eyes
Apprentices-
-Lionpaw: large, long-haired golden-brown tom (mentor: Sunspots)
-Flowerpaw: black and white she-cat (mentor: Willowsong)
-Shrewpaw: dark brown tabby tom (mentor: Foxtooth)
-Tansypaw: brown and white tabby she-cat (mentor: Quietrain)
-Frostpaw: silver and white tabby she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Pebblestream)
Queens-
-Roseflight: long-haired ginger tabby she-cat (expecting Darkwater's kits)
Kits-None
Elders-None

SwiftClan
Leader-Hawkstar: dark brown tabby tom with a white chest
Deputy-Gorsetail: light brown tabby tom
Medicine Cat-Driftsong: pale gray she-cat
Warriors-
-Eaglewing: dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail
-Cloudheart: lithe white she-cat
-Falconeye: light brown tabby tom with amber eyes
-Runningcreek: silver tabby she-cat
-Stoneclaw: dark gray tom

-Sagetail: brown and white tabby she-cat
-Twistfoot: large tabby tom with a lame paw
-Tawnyfeather: tortoiseshell she-cat
Apprentices-
-Eclipsepaw: black and white she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Sagetail)
-Windpaw: black tom with a white chest (mentor: Runningcreek)
-Gentlepaw: small gray tabby she-cat (mentor: Cloudheart)
-Vinepaw: pale brown tom with dark brown stripes (mentor: Falconeye)
-Fogpaw: pale gray and white tom (mentor: Gorsetail)
Queens-
-Russetlight: russet tabby she-cat (mother to Falconeye's kits: Amberkit, Snowkit, and Kestrelkit)
Kits-
-Amberkit: ginger tabby she-kit (mother: Russetlight)
-Kestrelkit: light brown tabby tom (mother: Russetlight)
-Snowkit: gray and white she-kit (mother: Russetlight)
Elders-
-Adderstrike: dark brown tabby tom

Chapter 11

[image]

For the next three days, Rowanpaw was stuck cleaning out all of the dens and bringing them new moss. Ravenwing told him that he was lucky it was only three days; he would've made him do it for a quarter moon. Wrenpaw moved into the nursery ashamed and alone. Wolfpaw still wouldn't admit that the kits were his, but he walked around camp all high and mighty.

Both Crowpaw and Rowanpaw visited her at least once a day. Somehow, her distress brought them together to act like real brothers. Crowpaw still ignored him whenever Wrenpaw wasn't around, but at least he didn't shove him around anymore. Rowanpaw grew closer with Wrenpaw than he's ever been. It felt like he finally had a sister.

Rowanpaw carried a rabbit and made his way to the elders den. Skystar had also appointed him to help out with Fernshade, the only elder. He brought her fresh-kill, groomed her pelt, and brought her fresh bedding. In exchange, though, Fernshade often told him stories about his mother.

He ducked into the elders den and found the old light brown tabby she-cat wide awake. It was just past dawn and she usually slept in longer than that. Her green eyes brightened when he walked in.

"Rowanpaw, good morning!" Fernshade purred.

"Uh, good morning?" Rowanpaw set down the rabbit at her paws. "I brought you some fresh-kill." He pushed it towards her and she sniffed it.

"Have you eaten yet, Rowanpaw?" Fernshade wondered. He shook his head. "Well, then you can share this with me. I'd never be able to finish it anyways." She motioned for him to sit down, so he obeyed. "Go on, take a bite."

He leaned over and took a bite of the rabbit. It tasted so good. "Mmm, try it, Fernshade."

The tabby she-cat purred in a raspy tone. She took a bite and her eyes lit up. They ate together with the occasional conversation. Fernshade asked about his training, how he was getting along with the other apprentices. It bewildered him that she seemed to care so much. She surprised him with how much she knew about him.

"Why do you care so much about me?" Rowanpaw asked her suddenly. "I'm the reason that Ivorymoon is dead. She was your daughter."

Fernshade stopped eating and lifted her head so that her green eyes were even with Rowanpaw's. "And you're her son, do I need a better reason? You're my kin, too, Rowanpaw. Did you not think that I wouldn't look out for you just because the entire clan blames you for something that's not your fault? Kitting is dangerous, dear Rowanpaw. That's a fact of life."

"So why does the entire clan blame me?" Rowanpaw shot back bitterly, angrily.

"Because they need someone to blame." Fernshade answered blankly. She blinked slowly at him and sighed. "Do you know what Ivorymoon would say if she were here?" He shook his head. "She would tell you to stop blaming yourself. You walk around this camp everyday as if you're guilty for existing. So stop."

Rowanpaw pondered this for a moment. Then a real question came to mind, one he's always wondered the answer to. "Fernshade, do you know who my father was?"

Fernshade started at his question. "I never met him, Rowanpaw. Your mother would sneak off to meet him near the RainClan border, so I assumed that he might be a RainClan tom. I never found out because I never asked; I assumed that if Ivorymoon wanted me to know that she would tell me."

"Oh," Rowanpaw meowed, crestfallen. "I'd better get to work. I'll visit you later, Fernshade." He got up and left the den. She hadn't

given him the answer that he wanted

Rowanpaw didn't pay attention to where he was going and ran directly into Nightfang. The young black warrior growled and cuffed Rowanpaw's ear. "Watch where you're going, 'paw! That or maybe I'll feed you to the crows!" Then he stomped off.

Sighing, Rowanpaw left out of the camp entrance. He needed space from the suffocating camp. The forest welcomed him with fresh air and the smell of rain. Last night it had stormed, keeping him up almost all night long.

Ever since the fight with Wolfpaw, the clan fell back into their old ways of treating him like dirt. Sablepaw wouldn't talk to him and whenever Hollowpaw tried to reach out, either Wolfpaw or Sablepaw came along. The only apprentice that talked to him nowadays was Wrenpaw which came as a surprise.

All the warriors seemed to ignore him unless absolutely necessary. Some went out of their way, like Nightfang and Briarfrost, to push him around or make mean comments. Rowanpaw felt like a kit again, helpless against their attacks. Ravenwing trained him harder than ever, running him until he couldn't breath, fighting him until he was battered.

Now Rowanpaw walked around with a broken body *and* a broken heart. *Maybe Wolfpaw and Crowpaw should stop calling me Deathpaw and call me Brokenpaw instead*. He thought to himself. *Maybe* I *should call myself Brokenpaw.*

Rowanpaw hadn't realized it, but he stopped when he realized that he walked himself to Moonhollow. It looked different in the daylight, smaller. He walked down the slope in between the rocky cliffs into the hollow. The stream fell over his head and fell into the Moonlitpool. Stepping forward, Rowanpaw looked at his reflection in the pool, looking for any recognition.

"It's sad, isn't it?"

Rowanpaw spun around, heart racing, and came face to face with a cat he's never seen before. The tom's pelt was reddish-brown with

darker tabby markings. His eyes were greener than the forest, a shade so bright that his eyes seemed to glow. The tom stepped forward, causing Rowanpaw to talk a step back.

"It's sad when you don't recognize your own reflection." The tom's face held so much wisdom and sorrow at the same time. He stared into the pool for a moment before looking back up at Rowanpaw. His eyes turned from green to black. "Hello, Rowanpaw."

"W-who are you?" Rowanpaw tried to stand straight, to make himself *look* strong. But his voice quivered and his fur stood on end. This tom frightened him, something about him didn't sit right with Rowanpaw.

The tom chuckled and stepped closer to Rowanpaw. There was no where else for him to go. "How rude of me? I forgot my manners!" The tom's eyes changed from black to red. "My name is Poisonblood."

Rowanpaw's jaw hung agape. He's never heard of a Poisonblood. That name would be hard to forget, and why did his eyes keep changing color?! "What clan do you belong to? I've never heard of you."

"Oh, you wouldn't have." Poisonblood's eyes turned back to green, making him seem almost normal. Almost. "That's a conversation for another time. Listen, I've been watching you, Rowanpaw. You put up with so much for no reason. Your clanmates, they push you around and make you feel worthless. If only you knew the power that runs in your blood."

Rowanpaw flattened his ears in disbelief. "I'm not powerful or special. All I want is to be the best warrior that I can be."

"And what if I could promise you that? And so much more?" Poisonblood's eyes gleamed and he unsheathed his claws, digging them into the dirt.

Now Rowanpaw was curious. "How?"

"Come back here in two nights. I'll be here and explain everything,"

Poisonblood promised.

Slowly, Rowanpaw nodded, "I'll be here." Then he turned to leave. When he glanced over his shoulder, Poisonblood was already gone.

Chapter 12

[image]

Rowanpaw dodged Ravenwing's blow and rolled on the ground. He found his footing quickly and spun around to face his mentor. The strong black tom was already charging him, paws outstretched. Rowanpaw dived underneath his mentor and kicked off.

Ravenwing crashed into a tree trunk and it knocked the breath out of him for a few heartbeats, enough for Rowanpaw to pin him. He was getting stronger every day, and quicker. Each practice brought him closer to becoming a warrior. Ravenwing said that he even surpassed Wolfpaw's training.

"Very good, Rowanpaw," Ravenwing meowed before pushing the younger tom off of him. "We'll continue this tomorrow," The black tom panted. "Go back to camp and get yourself some fresh-kill."

Rowanpaw dipped his head to his mentor and started to walk back to camp. He kept a watchful eye out for Sweetkit, but she never showed. Perhaps she was upset with him, but he couldn't understand why. Ever since his fight with Wolfpaw, he could use her company.

The camp was busy this time of day. Most cats laid in the shade either eating fresh-kill or sharing tongues. It was too hot to patrol or hunt, so sunhigh was the time to rest. Wolfpaw, Sablepaw, Hollowpaw, and Crowpaw all sat outside the apprentice den sharing tongues. Skystar shared tongues with Raccoontail, Nightfang and Briarfrost slept side by side in the shade, and Hazelkit and Lilackit tussled in the dirt.

It made Rowanpaw happy to see Hazelkit back to her old self. She and her sister would probably be apprenticed soon. Lilackit seemed to be the perfect candidate for medicine cat apprentice while Hazelkit was a warrior to the bone. Rowanpaw wondered who would mentor her.

Rowanpaw approached the fresh-kill pile and picked out a vole for himself; he wasn't too hungry. He settled down in the shade at the edge of camp and watched the clan go about their business. It's been a day since his mysterious meeting with Poisonblood and he couldn't shake him from his memory.

Who was he, really?

"Rowanpaw! Rowanpaw!" Hazelkit dashed across the clearing when she noticed him there. Her hazel eyes gleamed with excitement as she bounced around him. "Guess what?! Come on, guess!"

His whiskers twitched in amusement at her. "I have no idea, tell me."

The sleek she-kit attempted to stand still but was still fidgeting. "I'm going to be made an apprentice tomorrow! Isn't that great?!"

"That's great, Hazelkit!" A purr rumbled in his throat. "Do you want to share my vole?"

Hazelkit licked her lips and tucked into the small rodent. Blood stained her white chin as she chewed on the tender meat. "Mmm, it's good."

"You can finish it if you want," Rowanpaw offered and pushed the vole towards her. "I'm not very hungry at the moment."

A quizzical expression found the young she-kit's face. "But you've been out all day training; surely you're hungry?"

Rowanpaw shook his head and ignored the pains in his empty stomach. As a kit, he'd gotten used to eating very small amounts. If he went to grab something for himself, either Crowpaw or Wrenpaw would take it from him. He still wasn't used to eating large amounts of prey that to any other cat would be normal. It's a wonder he wasn't skin and bones.

Hazelkit shrugged and continued to eat the vole. She settled down beside him and ate in silence. Rowanpaw looked out at the clearing but every now and then he glanced at Hazelkit. Even though she was so small, she had heart and guts. That would make her a great

warrior one day, one that the clan could respect. They'll respect her in ways they'll never respect him.

Clearing his throat, Rowanpaw stood up. "I'll see you around, Hazelkit." He padded off towards the nursery to find Wrenpaw. He's grown considerably closer with his foster sister.

Entering the dimly light nursery immediately brought back memories from when he was a young kit. These nursery walls had never felt so constricting or so dark as they had on the cold leaf-bare nights without a mother. While Crowpaw and Wrenpaw snuggled closer to Olivenose, he was pushed away. His kithood days were cold and dark.

"Rowanpaw?" Wrenpaw's soft voice brought him back to the present and his green eyes found Wrenpaw curled up in a nest. She pushed herself into a sitting position as he approached her. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to check in on you," Rowanpaw answered quietly, afraid that he would be pushed away.

He expected to find cold distance in her eyes, but instead he found warmth. "Thank you, Rowanpaw," Wrenpaw's green eyes held a sorrow that a cat her age should not know. He's known that sorrow all his life. "W-Wolfpaw still won't talk to me...He won't claim these kits." Her eyes glistened with tears and she looked up into his eyes. "How can I raise them without their father?"

Anger filled Rowanpaw's heart. He didn't bother holding his tongue. "Those kits would be better off without Wolfpaw as their father."

Wrenpaw outright gasped at his harsh words. "You can't possibly mean that! Every kit deserves to have a father!"

"I grew up without a father or a mother!" Rowanpaw growled, green eyes flaring. "If Wolfpaw won't claim those kits as his, then he doesn't deserve them. Wolfpaw is only their biological father, he's not like a real father should be!"

Wrenpaw was silent with a downcast expression on her face.

"Olivenose won't talk to me. I-I think she's embarrassed... She doesn't support me."

Rowanpaw moved closer to his foster sister and looked into her eyes. Serious as could be, he uttered his next words carefully: "I'll support you."

Chapter 13

[image]

He felt cold...so cold...

His vision slowly returned to him and he took in his surroundings. The forest around him was dark with tall, twisted trees that covered the sky. What little bit of the sky that he could see was completely black. The coldness crept into his bones as he stood there shaking.

Where was Sweetkit? Why was he dreaming of such a cold place?

"Hello again, Rowanpaw." A voice spoke from behind.

Spinning on his haunches, Rowanpaw came face to face with Poisonblood. The powerful russet tabby tom stalked towards him and the shadows receded across his shoulders. His green eyes changed into a deep crimson color to match the blood flowing through his veins.

Rowanpaw remained frozen in Poisonblood's gaze, equal to a mouse in the path of a predator. After a few long heartbeats, he somehow found the courage to speak. "Poisonblood, what am I doing here?"

The crimson in Poisonblood's eyes darkened to black, startling Rowanpaw. "You are here on my account, Rowanpaw. Did I not promise you that we would meet again?" His claws unsheathed to dig into the dirt. "You and I are more alike than you think, dear Rowanpaw."

"I-I don't even know you!" Rowanpaw stammered as he tried to hide the quickening of his heart or the flash of fear in his emerald eyes.

Poisonblood paused his advances and stood taller, making Rowanpaw seem small. "In due time, Rowanpaw, I will tell you. But you must first prove yourself worthy. Have patience and keep your mind open to me. I will return soon."

With that said, the russet tom started to disappear, fading like mist in sunshine. Rowanpaw was left in the dark forest with nothing but the

shadows for company. How did he find his way out of here?

"Rowanpaw?" A small voice whispered from the shadows. He turned his gaze in time to witness Sweetkit emerging from the undergrowth. Her blue eyes were wide and fearful. "What are you doing here?"

"I woke up here," Rowanpaw answered bluntly. Why should he need to explain his every action to her?

"You need to go and never come back here," Sweetkit hissed. She spoke strongly, but Rowanpaw could see the fear in her eyes.

Rowanpaw felt perplexed. The scariest aspect of Poisonblood was his name and his changing eye color. Other than that, he's kept his word. "Why? I can return if I want!"

Sweetkit flattened her ears and a scowl found her pretty little face. "You don't belong here, Rowanpaw."

Rage took hold of his heart, a tiny spark became a flame. "That's all that anyone's ever told me! The names I've been called, the things they say to me...'you don't belong here, Deathpaw', 'cat killer', 'why's your pelt so red, Deathpaw?'!"

Sweetkit opened her mouth to speak, but Rowanpaw cut her off before she could. "I'm so sick and tired of everyone telling me who I am and who I will never be! For once, I'd like to make my own choice and no one's going to stop me!"

That's when his vision started to fade. He was waking up. The last thing he saw was the sorrow and disappointment in Sweetkit's eyes.

~

"All cats who can hunt, join me beneath the Tallrock for a clan meeting!" Skystar yowled.

Rowanpaw opened his eyes and saw that he was the last of the apprentices in the den. He quickly stood up and stretched before joining the clan. At the mouth of the nursery, Rowanpaw noticed Pineclaw and Starlingwing sitting with Hazelkit and Lilackit.

Of course! How could he have forgotten? Today was their apprentice ceremony! Hazelkit could hardly sit still and Starlingwing kept shushing her. Rowanpaw felt amused at her excitement. At least she was fully recovered.

Skystar leaped down from the Tallrock to stand at the center of the clearing. Everyone circled around as Hazlekit and Lilackit came to stand in front of Skystar. Rowanpaw settled down a little ways from Hollowpaw and Sablepaw. They still weren't on the best terms since he attacked their brother.

"Cats of HiddenClan, today is the day that two young kits begin on the path to becoming respectable cats within the clan. Hazelkit," Skystar motioned for the young tortoiseshell and white she-cat to come forward, which she did so willingly. "Hazelkit, until you earn your warrior name in the eyes of StarClan, you will be known as Hazelpaw." The blue-gray tom's gaze surveyed the gathering of cats for one in particular. "Raccoontail, you are a dignified and loyal warrior of HiddenClan. I know that you can teach Hazelpaw the ways of the clan."

Then Skystar nodded to Mistypool. The gray and white she-cat came to stand beside the clan leader and faced the clan. "My dear clanmates, as you know I will not be around forever. I have chosen Lilackit, if she accepts, to become your next medicine cat."

The eyes of the clan turned on the timid, young she-cat. Hazelpaw's sister lifted her chin proudly. "I accept."

"Then, in the eyes of StarClan, I name you Lilacpaw," Skystar announced.

The clan's voices rose together in a chorus. "Hazelpaw! Lilacpaw!"

Rowanpaw didn't cheer. The memory of his Dreamscape was still fresh in his mind. Sweetkit's warning seemed all the more real as soon as he opened his eyes. Why had her words stung so bad? He's heard the same demeaning words all of his life.

He turned to walk away from the clan. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw Hazelpaw talking excitedly with her new mentor,

Raccoontail. With the excitement of being an apprentice, maybe she would finally forget about him.

Chapter 14

[image]

The days following Hazelpaw's apprenticeship, Rowanpaw avoided her at all costs. He slept on the opposite side of the den from her which seemed to confuse her. Sometimes she would make an effort to speak to him, but he would make up some excuse: he had to clean the elders den, Ravenwing was taking him on patrol, he had to hunt for the elders... After a few days, Hazelpaw seemed defeated.

Rowanpaw hated seeing her so distressed, but he kept telling himself that it was for her own good. She was a beautiful, intelligent young she-cat. Her whole life lay ahead of her with endless possibilities. As far as the clan was concerned, he would always be a burden...an outcast. He couldn't let her throw away her potential by befriending him.

Although he kept his distance, Rowanpaw looked out for Hazelpaw from afar. He watched her befriend Sablepaw and Wrenpaw. She was a very likable cat. Rowanpaw even painfully watched her grow close with Crowpaw. She would eat beside him and Crowpaw even played with her.

Hazelpaw seemed to have forgotten him.

It's been half a moon since Hazelpaw and Lilacpaw became apprentices. The clan was excited because tonight was the Gathering. They couldn't stop talking about it and they chattered all day like birds. Rowanpaw ignored the idle chat and focused on his training. The sun was high in the sky and he's already gone hunting with Ravenwing, Thrushfeather, and Flameheart. Not to mention he had gone on the dawn patrol.

Needless to say, Rowanpaw was quite tired. While the clan gathered in the clearing to share-tongues and eat, Rowanpaw laid in the shade and watched silently. Thrushfeather groomed Ashcloud's pelt, Nightfang and Briarfrost sat so close that their pelts were brushing,

and Crowpaw play-fought with Wolfpaw while Sablepaw, Hollowpaw, and Hazelpaw looked on.

For a moment, Hazelpaw's amber-green eyes met his and for a heartbeat, the world seemed to stop. But then her attention was pulled away by Sablepaw and the moment ended. Rowanpaw heaved a sigh and stood up. It's been a while since he's visited Wrenpaw in the nursery.

No one noticed as he passed by and slipped into the private den. Inside, Rowanpaw found Wrenpaw half-asleep in her nest. Her belly was round with her unborn kits-it wouldn't be long until they arrived.

Suddenly, Wrenpaw opened her eyes and gasped at the sudden sight of him. "Rowanpaw?!"

"Sorry!" Rowanpaw winced, "I shouldn't have snuck up on you like that."

His foster sister relaxed again and tucked her front paws underneath her chest. She looked discontent with a faraway look in her eyes. Rowanpaw felt bad for her. While the rest of them were nearing their warrior ceremony more every day, she was stuck in her expecting kits that Wolfpaw didn't even want. Rowanpaw still had a sneaky suspicion that Wolfpaw had forced her, but Wrenpaw never confirmed it.

She didn't deny it either.

"Mistypool says that the kits could come any day now..." Wrenpaw murmured, betraying the fright in her eyes. She lifted her eyes up to him and looked at him, *really* looked at him. "I'm so scared, Rowanpaw. I-I'm not sure that I'm ready to be a mother."

Rowanpaw moved closer to comfort his sister. "You'll be a great mother, Wrenpaw. It doesn't matter what Wolfpaw says or does. Olivenose said that she'll help you, right?"

Wrenpaw snorted and narrowed her eyes. "Olivenose won't even look at me. She says that I've 'disgraced' her legacy."

He couldn't believe his ears. Olivenose was disowning Wrenpaw? Rowanpaw had always thought Olivenose cruel, but that had been towards him. One thing that he had always respected her for was her devotion to her kits. Apparently she wasn't as devoted as she seemed.

"What about Crowpaw? He'll support you, won't he?" Rowanpaw wondered.

At this, Wrenpaw laughed, but it was forced and painful. "Crowpaw can't think for himself. He agrees with whatever Wolfpaw says."

For the first time ever, Rowanpaw realized how isolated and alone Wrenpaw felt. Him and her, they were a lot alike. Both outcasts, both burdens to the clan... He moved close enough that their fur brushed. "I'll support you, Wrenpaw. Whenever you need someone to lean on, I'm here."

Wrenpaw looked into his eyes and he could've sworn that he saw gratitude. "Thank you, Rowanpaw. I...I'm sorry for how mean Crowpaw and I were to you as kits."

Rowanpaw blinked in surprise. "That means a lot to hear...Wrenpa-" He wasn't able to finish because Skystar yowled, signaling a clan meeting. "Come on," Rowanpaw murmured, "I'll help you."

Together, the left the nursery and joined the clan to hear what Skystar had to say. The blue-gray tom looked powerful with his pelt rippling underneath the sunlight. Rowanpaw led Wrenpaw near Sablepaw, Hazelpaw, and Lilacpaw.

"Cats of HiddenClan, tonight is the Gathering at Moonhollow." Skystar's voice boomed across the clearing. "I've decided that I will bring Ravenwing, Thrushfeather, Raccoontail, Darknight, Olivenose, Nightfang, Briarfrost, Rowanpaw, Wolfpaw, Sablepaw, Hazelpaw, and Lilacpaw."

Rowanpaw tried to hide his surprise, but he failed. With how the clan has treated him lately, it surprised him how Skystar wanted him to come. He glanced at Wrenpaw just in time to glimpse the disappointment in her eyes.

Chapter 15

[image]

Night finally came and the clan anxiously awaited Skystar. Rowanpaw kept his distance from the rest of the group. He watched them with careful eyes, wishing that he could be a part of them. Moonlight created deeper shadows in the forest but brightened the camp clearing.

"Rowanpaw?" His green eyes turned to see Hazelpaw looking at him meekly. "Um, could I sit by you?"

He merely shrugged and looked away. If he glanced at her, he feared that his walls might come crashing down. As much as he hated the walls, they were necessary. They kept him safe.

Hazelpaw sat down beside him and circled her tail over her front paws. Underneath the moonlight, her tortoiseshell pelt contrasted more with the white on her fur. For one moment, he glanced at her to find that she was already watching him.

"Why do you separate yourself from the rest of the Clan?" Hazelpaw wondered. Her hazel eyes were narrowed in confusion, she looked genuinely concerned.

Rowanpaw heaved a sigh. Clearly someone had to tell her. "The Clan doesn't like me," He answered bluntly. "They blame me for something terrible."

"What do they blame you for?" Hazelpaw whispered so that no one else would hear them.

He opened his mouth to speak, but at that same time, Skystar joined the Clan. The blue-gray tom's pelt appeared like silver underneath the moon's light. Without a word, Skystar turned and left the camp clearing. The clan followed behind him like a tidal wave.

Rowanpaw leaped to his paws to follow. Hazelpaw stuck close to

him, although he didn't understand why. She was friends with Sablepaw and Crowpaw, so why was she talking to him instead? Her behavior puzzled him more than he could say.

HiddenClan ran through the forest following the trail walked by countless generations. This was Rowanpaw's favorite part about Gatherings. In the face of the other clans, HiddenClan was united. That included him. Underneath Silverpelt, all of their differences fell away.

Skystar slowed down their pace and through the throng of cats he could see the MoonHollow. It stood outlined against the shadows regal as ever. Strangely, Rowanpaw immediately remembered Poisonblood at the sight of it. He shook the memory from his mind. Tonight he would be a regular HiddenClan apprentice. They trotted down the slope to find that they were the second clan to arrive.

SwiftClan was late.

Rowanpaw watched Wolfpaw, Crowpaw, Sablepaw, and Hollowpaw mingle with the same RainClan apprentices as last time. He thought their names might've been Lionpaw, Flowerpaw, and Shrewpaw. Hollowpaw met his gaze for a second, but Rowanpaw looked away.

"SwiftClan's here!" A voice called above the din.

He lifted his head to peer over the heads in his view. Hawkstar, the SwiftClan leader, was in the lead but Rowanpaw didn't see the deputy, Gorsetail. Was he sick? Almost immediately, the rumors started to spread like wildfire.

"He could be sick."

"Maybe he's dead?"

Almost immediately, the clan leaders started the Gathering. "Hawkstar, why don't you go first?" Brookstar suggested. Her underlying tone said that she was suspicious and curious.

"A quarter moon ago, Gorsetail died of heart sickness." Hawkstar announced sorrowfully and the MoonHollow was soon filled with empathetic whispers. "I've chosen for Cloudheart to be my new

deputy. So far, she's proven herself a worthy successor." The dark brown tom cleared his throat. "On a happier note, we have two new warriors: Windgorse and Eclipsepool."

"Windgorse! Eclipsepool!" All three clans cheered, but Rowanpaw cheered loudest for Eclipsepool.

Skystar nodded to Brookstar, allowing her to go first. "RainClan was blessed this moon. Darkwater and Roseflight now have four healthy kits. Also, we have three new warriors: Liongaze, Flowercloud, and Shrewtooth."

"Liongaze! Flowercloud! Shrewtooth!" The clans cheered once more.

Now it was HiddenClan's turn. Rowanpaw found Hazelpaw sitting next to Lilacpaw in the crowd. Skystar stepped forward, his muscles rippling underneath his blue-gray pelt.

"HiddenClan has two new apprentices. Hazelpaw has been apprenticed to Raccoontail and Lilacpaw to Mistypool." Skystar announced.

"Hazelpaw! Lilacpaw!" Rowanpaw noticed Hazelpaw soaking up all of the attention while Lilacpaw ducked her head shyly.

The Gathering was over, but the leaders were conversing which meant there was still some time left. Rowanpaw got up to perhaps talk with Hollowpaw, but he was cut off. Standing in his way was none other than Eclipsepool.

Her blue eyes were like two starlit pools and it was no wonder why she was named Eclipsepool. But they weren't cheerful or amused as usual. They were serious and distant.

"Rowanpaw, can I talk to you?" She asked in a whisper.

He nodded and followed her to a secluded corner of the MoonHollow. "What is it?" Rowanpaw asked, becoming slightly worried.

Eclipsepool glanced over her shoulders before she spoke. "I don't think that Gorsetail died of heart failure. I think he was murdered."

Rowanpaw's jaw gaped in surprise. "Murdered?!"

"Shh!" Eclipsepool hissed, her ears flat against her skull. "Listen, do you think you could meet me at the border tomorrow at midnight?"

He narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. "And why would I do that?"

"Because I need your help." Her eyes were pleading and he could see that she was desperate. Perhaps she wasn't lying. "Please, Gorsetail was my father."

Rowanpaw clenched his jaw as he considered her proposal. "Okay, I'll be there." Just then, the leaders split up and the clans started to disperse. Rowanpaw trotted away and met up with his clanmates.

"Why were you talking to her?" Hazelpaw asked him, studying Eclipsepool through the crowd.

"That's why we come to the Gatherings, Hazelpaw: to talk." He didn't want her to become suspicious.

Then Hazelpaw muttered something under her breath just loud enough for Rowanpaw to hear: "She's awfully pretty."

Allegiances Updated

HiddenClan
Leader-Skystar: blue-gray tom with amber eyes
Deputy-Ravenwing: black tom with a white chest
Medicine Cat-Mistypool: gray and white tabby she-cat
Warriors-
-Thrushfeather: golden-brown tom with dark flecks
-Raccoontail: long-haired gray she-cat with a black face and two tail rings
-Darknight: dark brown tabby tom
-Olivenose: dark brown she-cat with green eyes
-Birchleap: pale gray tom with black stripes
-Goldenheart: golden tabby she-cat with white paws
-Pineclaw: strong brown tabby tom
-Flameheart: orange tabby she-cat with amber eyes
-Nightfang: black tom with amber eyes
-Briarfrost: beautiful ginger, gray, and white tabby she-cat with green eyes
Apprentices-
-Wolfpaw: dark gray tom with white points (mentor: Nightfang)
-Sablepaw: cream-colored she-cat (mentor: Briarfrost)
-Hollowpaw: pale ginger tabby tom (mentor: Birchleap)
-Crowpaw: dusty black tom (mentor: Darknight)
-Rowanpaw: red-brown tom with spotted tabby markings and green eyes (mentor: Ravenwing)
-Hazelpaw: tortoiseshell and white she-cat with hazel eyes (mentor: Raccoontail)
-Lilacpaw: pale brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Mistypool)
Queens-
-Starlingwing: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Ashcloud: long-haired gray she-cat (mother to Thrushfeather's kits: Thunderkit and Fawnkit)
-Wrenpaw: brown and white tabby she-cat (expecting Wolfpaw's kits)
Kits-

-Thunderkit: stout, long-haired gray tom (mother: Ashcloud)
-Fawnkit: golden-brown she-kit with white flecks (mother: Ashcloud)
Elders-
-Fernshade: light brown tabby she-cat

RainClan
Leader-Brookstar: light gray tabby she-cat with green eyes
Deputy-Darkwater: dark gray tom with amber eyes
Medicine Cat-Quietrain: blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes
Warriors-
-Marshfur: brown and white tabby tom
-Pebblestream: gray she-cat with darker flecks
-Toadleap: light brown tabby tom
-Ivysplash: silver tabby she-cat with black stripes
-Willowsong: long-haired brown and white tabby she-cat
-Foxtooth: russet tom with black paws
-Daisypetal: cream-colored she-cat
-Sunspots: white tom with ginger patches
-Mossbreeze: lithe black she-cat with green eyes
-Liongaze: large, long-haired golden-brown tom
-Flowercloud: black and white she-cat
-Shrewtooth: dark brown tabby tom
Apprentices-
-Tansypaw: brown and white tabby she-cat (mentor: Quietrain)
-Frostpaw: silver and white tabby she-cat with blue eyes (mentor: Pebblestream)
Queens-
-Roseflight: long-haired ginger tabby she-cat (mother to Darkwater's kits: Mousekit, Plumkit, Coyotekit, and Yewkit)
Kits-
-Mousekit: small dark gray tom (mother: Roseflight)
-Plumkit: long-haired ginger tabby she-kit (mother: Roseflight)
-Coyotekit: large ginger tabby tom (mother: Roseflight)
-Yewkit: ginger and gray tabby she-kit (mother: Roseflight)
Elders-None

SwiftClan
Leader-Hawkstar: dark brown tabby tom with a white chest
Deputy-Cloudheart: lithe white she-cat

Medicine Cat-Driftsong: pale gray she-cat
Warriors-
-Eaglewing: dark brown tabby tom with a white-tipped tail
-Falconeye: light brown tabby tom with amber eyes
-Runningcreek: silver tabby she-cat
-Stoneclaw: dark gray tom
-Sagetail: brown and white tabby she-cat
-Twistfoot: large tabby tom with a lame paw
-Tawnyfeather: tortoiseshell she-cat
-Windgorse: black tom with a white chest
-Eclipsepool: black and white she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentices-
-Gentlepaw: small gray tabby she-cat (mentor: Cloudheart)
-Vinepaw: pale brown tom with dark brown stripes (mentor: Falconeye)
-Fogpaw: pale gray and white tom (mentor: Tawnyfeather)
Queens-
-Russetlight: russet tabby she-cat (mother to Falconeye's kits: Amberkit, Snowkit, and Kestrelkit)
Kits-
-Amberkit: ginger tabby she-kit (mother: Russetlight)
-Kestrelkit: light brown tabby tom (mother: Russetlight)
-Snowkit: gray and white she-kit (mother: Russetlight)
Elders-
-Adderstrike: dark brown tabby tom

Chapter 16

[image] [image]

Dawn came all too soon and Rowanpaw rose out of his nest. His paws were heavy, his eyes struggled to stay open, and his mind felt slow. Wolfpaw and Sablepaw were already gone leaving Rowanpaw to conclude that they went on the dawn patrol.

Outside the apprentice den, the camp was quiet. Obviously most cats were still exhausted after last night's Gathering. Upon their return, they'd discovered that Ashcloud had kitted. She was now the mother of two kits which left everyone going to sleep happy. His mind wandered back to the Gathering and he remembered his promise to Eclipsepool. How could he possibly be of any help to her?

Rowanpaw was pulled from his thoughts when Ravenwing called his name from the other side of camp. The black tom flicked his tail impatiently as Rowanpaw sulked over. He looked expectantly at Ravenwing, waiting for instruction.

"We're going hunting with Thrushfeather and Flameheart," Ravenwing announced before walking to the camp entrance.

Thrushfeather and Flameheart appeared from the warriors den and came over to join them. Rowanpaw liked both Thrushfeather and Flameheart. They never treated him like dirt or even joined in the taunting. Thrushfeather was a golden-brown tom and one of the senior warriors. Flameheart was younger and had a pelt like fire.

Ravenwing led the way out of camp with Thrushfeather at his flank. Rowanpaw fell into step with Flameheart. The orange tabby she-cat walked with a spring in her step and kept her ears alert. Her energy inspired Rowanpaw to become more energetic as well.

The last few days, he and Ravenwing have been focusing on fighting and border patrols. Hunting would be a welcome break. Rowanpaw kept his senses alert as they made their way through the

forest. They leaped over the small stream that ran through the heart of the territory. It felt like flying.

"Alright, split up." Ravenwing ordered, "We'll meet back here."

Rowanpaw wandered away from the group to search for prey. He headed towards the stream knowing that prey sometimes hung around there. A twig snapped somewhere ahead of him and he froze. Lifting his nose to the air, he sniffed to try and figure out what kind of animal it was. But there was no scent.

Strange... Rowanpaw thought to himself. He stalked forward, keeping close to the ground.

"Hello again, Rowanpaw."

He spun around, his heart racing against his chest. Sitting in the shadows was the figure of Poisonblood. Rowanpaw's fur stood on end. Why did this cat keep showing up out of nowhere? *What does he want with me?*

"An excellent question, my young pupil." Poisonblood emerged from the shadows to step into the light. For a cat he was quite tall and muscles rippled underneath his pelt. His claws glistened in the sunlight. Everything about this tom set Rowanpaw on edge.

"I-I'm not your pupil," Rowanpaw tried to sound strong, but his voice quivered.

Poisonblood laughed, causing Rowanpaw's fur to stand on end. "Oh, but you are. You've got no other choice."

Rowanpaw tried to stand taller and face Poisonblood head on. "There's always a choice." Sweetkit popped into his mind. Her fear of this tom had been evident."Who are you, really? Someone I trust warned me about you and I want to know why."

Anger flashed in Poisonblood's eyes, turning them red. "You cannot trust her! I am the only one who has ever been honest with you, Rowanpaw!" His eyes returned to green as he took a deep breath. "I know the true circumstances of your birth, Rowanpaw. There's a reason the clan doesn't trust you, but it's not your fault."

His heart skipped a beat at Poisonblood's words. "Do you know who my father is?"

Poisonblood's eyes turned the deepest shade of blue that Rowanpaw's ever seen. "Right now it doesn't matter who your father is. All that matters is that you understand one thing and one thing only: your clan don't love you. They will betray you the first chance they get. Nothing you do will make them accept you. I'm the only one that accepts you for up who you truly are, Rowanpaw."

Rowanpaw's throat tightened in distress. "You're lying. I'm one of them!"

Poisonblood's eyes returned to their natural green form. He met Rowanpaw's gaze with intensity. "Are you really? If you believe that, then you're a fool. When your precious clan let's you down, I'll be there to catch you. It's only a matter of time."

Rowanpaw watched as Poisonblood's shape shimmered until he disappeared completely. His heart sank with the weight of his emotions. How could he trust Poisonblood? His very name sounded evil! But he spoke the truth that Rowanpaw refused to admit.

He would never be a part of HiddenClan. Not really.

"Rowanpaw?" Ravenwing appeared from the undergrowth. "Have you caught anything?"

"No," Rowanpaw didn't look up or move a muscle. He was drowning in Poisonblood's words.

"Well, we're all heading back to camp." Ravenwing growled then turned on his heel and stalked off.

Rowanpaw just stood there. He imagined a battle. Claws flashed in his vision, blood splattered. Fear took hold of his heart and he closed his eyes, but the vision didn't fade. A cat stood over him with eyes as cold as ice. All around him are his clanmates, watching but not helping. His cries for help fill the air but no one makes a move to come to his rescue. Then death comes.

He gasped for breath, shaking. What if Poisonblood was right?

What if a day came when his clanmates turned their backs on him? It didn't matter what he did, they would always see him as an outsider.

Chapter 17

[image]

Night fell upon the forest and Rowanpaw waited restlessly in his nest for the clan to fall asleep. All he could think about was Eclipsepool and their meeting tonight. It couldn't exactly be treason if he didn't cross the border, right? Besides, he wouldn't tell her anything that could harm HiddenClan.

Just outside the walls of the camp, Rowanpaw could hear crickets and in the distance there was a hoot of an owl. A gentle breeze twisted through the trees, stirring the warm air with smells of the forest. Rowanpaw itched to run, to feel the soil beneath his paws. Time seemed to pass slowly...so slowly.

Snores from his denmates told Rowanpaw that they were all sound asleep. None of them stirred when he quietly rose to his paws. Well, almost none of them.

"Rowanpaw?" Hazelpaw whispered. The moonlight that streamed into the den reflected in her hazel eyes. "Where are you going?"

"To use the dirtplace," Rowanpaw lied effortlessly. "Go back to sleep."

The tortoiseshell she-cat laid her head back down, allowing Rowanpaw to slip out of the den. HiddenClan's camp was silent, but Rowanpaw knew that one lone warrior would be guarding the entrance. He stalked through the shadows at the edge of the camp with his eyes trained on the exit.

Sitting in the shadows was Briarfrost. Rowanpaw never did like her. She reminded him of Wolfpaw in the way that she placed herself above everyone. Briarfrost waltzed around camp all entitled. Rowanpaw wrinkled his nose. How was he supposed to get past her?

Suddenly, motion at the edge of his vision caught his eye. Emerging

from the warriors den was a black tom. Ravenwing? No, Rowanpaw realized that it was Nightfang. Wolfpaw's mentor strode over to Briarfrost and they greeted each other warmly.

Then, to Rowanpaw's surprise, they left the camp together. Briarfrost was just going to leave the camp entrance unattended?! What would happen if RainClan or SwiftClan decided to attack?!

Rowanpaw took his chance and exited the camp. With the moon as his only guide, he weaved through the trees and undergrowth. He headed in the general direction of SwiftClan, making sure that no late night wanderers spotted him. It was easy for Rowanpaw to regress into his old habits of blending in with the shadows.

A breeze carried SwiftClan's scent to Rowanpaw and he knew that he was nearing the border. Just being out of camp excited him, but now he was also having a secret meeting with a SwiftClan warrior? What would the clan say if they found out? Rowanpaw remembered Poisonblood's eerie warning but then shook it from his mind. No one would know.

Through the trees, Rowanpaw could glimpse SwiftClan's moors. He slowed down and neared the border very cautiously. Eclipsepool wasn't anywhere in sight, so he decided to stay hidden until she showed up. Rowanpaw made himself comfortable in the shadows, tucking his front paws underneath his chest.

Over the rise there was movement. A small shape raced across the moors in his direction. As the shape neared, Rowanpaw could make out Eclipsepool's black and white pelt. He rose to his paws and stepped from the undergrowth to greet her. Eclipsepool stopped in front of him, the only thing separating them was the scent-line.

"You came," Eclipsepool seemed surprised.

As much as Rowanpaw wanted to talk, he also knew that he couldn't be gone too long. "Tell me why you think Gorsetail was murdered."

Eclipsepool seemed taken back at his directness. "Hawkstar said that Gorsetail died in his sleep from heart failure, but the night he

died...I saw them carrying his body back. He'd died outside the camp."

"That doesn't have to mean he was murdered," Rowanpaw pointed out.

"But why would Hawkstar lie about how he died?" Eclipsepool wondered, lashing her tail angrily. "Why not say the truth?"

Rowanpaw had to admit that it was awfully peculiar, but why should it matter to him? He wasn't a part of SwiftClan! "I don't know, Eclipsepool. What does this have to do with me?"

"Well, when they brought him back, I found some pine needles clinging to his pelt." Eclipsepool announced, and then her blue eyes locked with his. "Pine trees only grow in HiddenClan's territory. I was wondering if maybe you'd seen him? Or someone else saw him?"

"I never saw him," Rowanpaw replied cooly. "Besides, if someone *had* seen him, they wouldn't tell me about it. I'm practically an outcast in HiddenClan."

Eclipsepool frowned in confusion, her blue eyes pensive. "Why would your clan treat you like an outcast?"

Rowanpaw opened his mouth and closed it. He wasn't sure if he should say. But who was she going to tell? She couldn't tell SwiftClan without admitting that she'd met him here tonight.

"They blame me for my mother's death. She died...in kit-birth." Rowanpaw looked away from her, unable to meet her gaze.

"Well, that's rabbit-brained," Eclipsepool mewed. "You were only a kit."

Rowanpaw sighed, looking back at her. "Apparently it doesn't matter. Cats will believe whatever they want."

For the longest moment, they were both silent. The only sounds around them were crickets and wind. Rowanpaw wished that it could be like this all the time.

"Don't let them keep you down, Rowanpaw. You've got to stand up for yourself." Eclipsepool turned to leave but paused. She glanced over her shoulder at him. "If you find out anything, you'll tell me, won't you?"

Rowanpaw didn't say a word, merely nodded. He watched Eclipsepool run off until she disappeared over the rise. It was his turn to return to camp.

Chapter 18

[image]

"Rowanpaw! Rowanpaw!" Someone jabbed him with their claws and pounced on him. He gasped and his green eyes flashed open. Hazelpaw stood over him with excitement in her hazel eyes. "Get up!"

When Rowanpaw raised his head, he realized that it couldn't even be dawn. The camp was still cloaked in darkness and the other apprentices slept soundly. How could they still sleep with the racket Hazelpaw was making?

"What is it?" Rowanpaw asked her, slightly annoyed.

Hazelpaw got off of him but still seemed unable to contain her excitement. "Wrenpaw's kitting! She's asking for you."

In less than a heartbeat, Rowanpaw was on his paws and racing across camp to the nursery. Through the gloom, he could make out Mistypool, Lilacpaw, Starlingwing, and Ashcloud at Wrenpaw's side. Starlingwing had decided to stay in the nursery to help Wrenpaw with her kits which set Wrenpaw's mind at ease. Especially since Olivenose disowned her.

"Rowanpaw?" Wrenpaw gasped for breath and laid her head back down. Her breathing was labored and her fur was slick with sweat.

He didn't waste another moment and settled at her side. "I'm here, Wrenpaw," Rowanpaw murmured. He licked her forehead in an attempt to comfort her. Since he wasn't her mate or full-blooded brother, the clan might look at him strange for being at the kitting, but he didn't care.

Ashcloud seemed a little aloof with him being there, but Starlingwing didn't bat an eye. She's mostly accepted him after he saved Hazelpaw. Lilacpaw offered Wrenpaw a stick to bite down on when the pain came. "You're doing great, Wrenpaw."

Wrenpaw screamed when the contractions started to become more prominent. Rowanpaw did his best to comfort her but he felt utterly useless. He's never watched kits being born and didn't have any idea what to do.

"I can see the first kit's head!" Mistypool exclaimed. "You're almost there, Wrenpaw."

The brown and white tabby she-cat bit down on the stick. Rowanpaw's eyes widened when he saw the first kit enter the world. It was so tiny, so fragile. He's never seen anything more beautiful. Mistypool passed the kit to Starlingwing who began to clean it gently. It had a dark gray tabby pelt.

"The next one's on its way," Mistypool announced.

Another kit entered into the world and this one had a pale brown tabby and white pelt. She was almost an exact image of Wrenpaw. This one was passed to Ashcloud. All the while Rowanpaw kept comforting his dear sister.

The third kit came and Rowanpaw was speechless. This kit had a dark ginger tabby pelt. He looked like a little fox. "Here Rowanpaw," Mistypool passed the ginger kit to him and he stared at it for a moment. "Go on, clean him up. He won't bite."

Rowanpaw moved his rough tongue over the kit's face then moved onto his pelt. He was so strong, so handsome. But Rowanpaw found it strange that he didn't look anything like Wrenpaw or Wolfpaw. In fact, he looked a little like Rowanpaw.

Wrenpaw screeched and the stick splintered in her jaws. The last kit had entered the world. It was a she-kit, and she had a golden tabby pelt. Lilacpaw cleaned the last kit. Starlingwing and Ashcloud placed two of the kits in the curve of Wrenpaw's belly while Mistypool cleaned the last kit. When Rowanpaw finished cleaning the last kit, he placed him beside his three brothers and sisters.

Rowanpaw looked upon them with deep admiration. They were so small and helpless. By nature they stuck close to Wrenpaw and began to suckle. His green eyes were locked on them in amazement.

Ashcloud and Starlingwing left to get something from the fresh-kill pile, leaving them with Mistypooland Lilacpaw. The medicine cat pushed some bitter smelling herbs towards Wrenpaw. "Eat these, they'll help your milk come. I'll come check on you in a little bit." Then she left with Lilacpaw at her side.

"They're beautiful, Wrenpaw," Rowanpaw murmured. Wrenpaw was watching her kits with deep love, but Rowanpaw noticed that she was crying. "What's wrong?"

"I love them," Wrenpaw sniffed, "But while you and the others are becoming warriors, I'll still be stuck in here."

Rowanpaw became silent and unsure of what to say. Instead, he stuck close to her for support. It was past dawn now and pale sunlight streamed into the nursery. The air outside smelled fresh and warm. What a beautiful day to be born.

Suddenly, a shadow became outlined against the nursery entrance. Rowanpaw jumped to his paws and stepped protectively in front of Wrenpaw. Standing there with rage in his amber eyes was Wolfpaw. He barged into the nursery and Rowanpaw cut him off.

"Get out of my way, Deathpaw!" Wolfpaw slashed at him, but Rowanpaw dodged just in time. Rowanpaw didn't budge. He wouldn't let Wolfpaw anywhere near Wrenpaw or the kits.

"Leave us, Wolfpaw!" Wrenpaw ordered, but her voice was shaking.

"I'm their father!" Wolfpaw snarled, baring his fangs. "I have a right to see my own kits!"

"You're no more a father than me!" Rowanpaw growled, narrowing his eyes. "Up until now, you wouldn't even admit that they were yours!"

Wolfpaw slashed his claws right across Rowanpaw's face. He yowled and clutched the side of his face which was now bleeding. "How was I supposed to know that she wasn't running around with other toms?!"

"They've always been yours!" Wrenpaw screeched angrily. "But you

don't deserve to be their father!"

Wolfpaw's gaze fell upon the kits and for a moment, he froze. "Two of them look like me..."

"Get out, Wolfpaw," Rowanpaw growled as he lashed his tail. The hair on his pelt stood on end. He wasn't messing around. "Wrenpaw doesn't want you here."

Wolfpaw narrowed his eyes at them. "I'm not going to let this go." Then he turned and rushed out of the nursery.

Rowanpaw kept his stance until he was sure that Wolfpaw was gone. Then he returned to Wrenpaw's side, still fuming. Wrenpaw laid the tip of her tail on his shoulder and he lifted his eyes to hers. "Thank you."

They didn't say another word, just sat together in the dimness of the nursery. Rowanpaw made a silent promise to protect these kits. They weren't his, they weren't even related by blood, but someone had to look out for them. He would look out for them like he wished someone had done for him.

Chapter 19

[image]

Rowanpaw stayed by Wrenpaw's side for most of the day. He only left her once to grab something from the fresh-kill pile for her. Olivenose came to visit once and the entire time she glared at Rowanpaw with disgust. She came and left without a word.

Around sunhigh, Crowpaw came to visit with Sablepaw and Hazelpaw. "They're so cute!" Hazelpaw exclaimed.

"And tiny." Sablepaw added, her eyes fixed in wonder on the kits.

Crowpaw sat especially close to Wrenpaw and Rowanpaw backed off a little to give them space. Despite everything, he still felt like he couldn't compete with Crowpaw for Wrenpaw's sisterly affection.

"I'm sorry to hear about what happened with Wolfpaw," Crowpaw whispered to Wrenpaw. "I should've been here."

"Rowanpaw helped me," Wrenpaw looked back at him with deep love and respect.

"But I should've been here for the kits' birth." Crowpaw argued passively.

"What? And have you passing out?" Wrenpaw's whiskers twitched in amusement. "I know how you can't handle blood, Crowpaw."

"What are their names?" Hazelpaw asked excitedly.

Wrenpaw turned to the young apprentice warmly. "I haven't named them yet, but I want to name the small gray tom Mousekit." Then she looked at Rowanpaw. "I want you to name the red tom."

Surprised, Rowanpaw could only stare at her. "Me?" Wrenpaw nodded. He looked down at the dark ginger tabby pensively. A tom like this one needed a strong name. "What about Falconkit?"

"I like it," Wrenpaw purred. "I'm thinking Honeykit for the golden she-kit and Brindlekit for the brown and white tabby she-kit."

"Mousekit, Falconkit, Honeykit, and Brindlekit." Crowpaw mused. "Good names for good kits."

"Hazelpaw!" Raccoontail called from outside. "Where are you? We're going hunting!"

Hazelpaw winced and let out a long sigh. "Well, guess I'll come back later." She raced outside and Rowanpaw chuckled.

"I should probably go too," Sablepaw decided. "Briarfrost was going to teach me this one fighting move." She left and it was just Wrenpaw, Crowpaw, and Rowanpaw.

Rowanpaw nodded to Wrenpaw, "I'll come check on you after training." He left the nursery feeling hopeful. How could he not?

Outside in the camp clearing, some cats were resting while others headed out on border patrols and such. Ravenwing noticed him and padded over. "We're going hunting since you didn't contribute much last time."

Rowanpaw groaned inwardly and followed his mentor out of camp. There was a slight chill in the air signaling that leaf-bare would be coming soon. The very thought of leaf-bare and snow made Rowanpaw shiver.

"Let's work on your hunting crouch," Ravenwing suggested. "Now, what's the difference between hunting a mouse and a rabbit?"

"The rabbit will hear you coming while a mouse will feel your pawsteps." Rowanpaw answered without a pause. He learnt this moons ago.

"Alright, show me how you would stalk a mouse." Ravenwing sat down. Rowanpaw crouched down and kept his paws light as he moved across the forest floor. "Good, and a rabbit?" Rowanpaw proceeded to stalk forward silently, careful to avoid brushing against the undergrowth. "Good, good. Now let's hunt."

Rowanpaw trotted off and followed the faint scent of a squirrel. He crouched down and stalked forward like a snake. When he was close enough, he lunged forward. The squirrel didn't see him until it was too late and he pinned it underneath his claws. Rowanpaw stashed it under the tangling roots of an old oak.

Motion out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. His fur stood on end as the shape lunged towards him. Rowanpaw found himself pinned underneath Ravenwing's sharp claws. The black tom held him tightly.

"Ravenwing, you're hurting me," Rowanpaw tried to talk evenly, calmly, but the look in Ravenwing's eyes scared him.

Without warning, the black tom raised his paw and clawed Rowanpaw across the face. Startled, Rowanpaw just stared in shock. But when Ravenwing started to claw at his stomach, Rowanpaw reacted. He kicked out his hind legs at Ravenwing's stomach. The deputy was caught off balance which gave Rowanpaw just enough time to slip away.

He ran into the forest, terrified. Ravenwing wasn't far behind, and Rownpaw didn't want to think about what would happen if he got caught again. Ravenwing came out of nowhere and knocked Rowanpaw to the ground. The more he struggled, the more Ravenwing dug his claws in.

"What's wrong with you?!" Rowanpaw shouted at his mentor.

Ravenwing's eyes were wild with no trace or rational thought. "I trusted you, Rowanpaw! Olivenose and I raised you like our own, and this is how you repay us? You're sick, Rowanpaw, and twisted!"

Rowanpaw's green eyes were wide with fear and confusion. "I don't know what you're talking about! What did I do?"

"You know, I didn't believe it at first. I didn't want to believe the rumors," Ravenwing stared down at him with eyes as cold as ice. "But then Wrenpaw called on you and you were there at the kitting. One of them even looks like you!" Ravenwing dug in his claws and Rowanpaw winced. "But she was your sister!"

It dawned on Rowanpaw what Ravenwing was talking about. Ravenwing thought that *he* was the father of Wrenpaw's kits?! Hadn't it been obvious to anyone else how close Wolfpaw and Wrenpaw were?

"It's not what you think, Ravenwing!" Rowanpaw insisted. "Wolfpaw is the father!"

"Not many fathers witness the births of their kits, not to mention other random toms." Ravenwing narrowed his eyes in disbelief. "They must be yours."

"I swear to StarClan they're not mine!" Rowanpaw argued.

Ravenwing tightened his grip around Rowanpaw's throat. "StarClan doesn't listen to low-born rogues like you."

Rage filled in Rowanpaw's heart. His mother had been a HiddenClan cat! Did the clan really believe that he was a rogue's son?

"Then on my mother's grave." Rowanpaw's voice was cold as ice. "I swear on Ivorymoon's grave that Wrenpaw's kits are not mine."

Ravenwing eyed him and Rowanpaw stared back. The black tom let him up with a sigh. Rowanpaw watched him head back to camp as he stood there bleeding. In that moment, Rowanpaw realized that Poisonblood was right.

He never will be a part of HiddenClan.

Chapter 20

[image] [image]

"Are you sure these cuts came from brambles?" Mistypool grumbled as she watched Lilacpaw cleanse the cuts Ravenwing made.

Rowanpaw flinched from the herb poultice Lilacpaw spread over the wound. "That stings!"

"Well, hold still and it won't hurt so much," Lilacpaw mumbled. She was much quieter than Hazelpaw.

Mistypool cleared her throat obnoxiously, narrowing her eyes at him. "You haven't answered my question, Rowanpaw. These cuts are too clean and deep to have been from brambles."

Rowanpaw clenched his jaw with frustration. Why couldn't she just leave him be? If he wanted her to know, he would say something! "Yes, I was chasing a rabbit and I wasn't paying attention. It went into the brambles, so I followed it."

The gray and white medicine cat narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Are you sure that no one did this to you?"

"They're bramble cuts, alright?!" Rowanpaw shouted, causing Lilacpaw to jump. The fur along his spine stood on end and his tail lashed with anger. After all he's been through, couldn't he enjoy some peace and quiet?

"Lilacpaw," Misypool meted softly. "Why don't you go eat something off of the fresh-kill pile? I can finish up here."

The skittish apprentice nodded gratefully and slipped out of the den. Rowanpaw clamped his mouth shut since he knew that Mistypool would prod him for answers. She circled him, studying his wounds, and heaved a sigh.

"Why aren't you honest with me?" Mistypool wondered. "I look out

for you, always have."

"Maybe you shouldn't." Ravenwing's harsh words echoed in his mind. Rowanpaw snapped, "StarClan doesn't care about low-born rogues like me!"

Mistypool blinked in surprise. "Where is this coming from? You don't know if you were rogue-born."

"And I don't know that I wasn't!" He pointed out sharply. "I wish that I was never born!"

"Don't say that, Rowanpaw," Mistypool's voice was hard and even. "Don't you ever say that."

Rowanpaw turned his angry green eyes on Mistypool. "Why am I even talking to you?! You're just a medicine cat!" He turned and fled Mistypool's den.

Pineclaw and Darknight had to dodge him as he blindly raced towards the camp entrance. His paws found the worn-down trail and he allowed it to take him into the forest. He left the camp behind him.

The trees and undergrowth blurred together. Rowanpaw darted down one path and then another. He didn't stop, he didn't think. He just ran. All his life he's been standing still, struggling to fade into the background. Life would be easier if he were invisible.

Rowanpaw ignored his tired paws. He didn't ever want to stop running. He wanted to put as much space in between him and HiddenClan. Poisonblood was right, he was right all along.

HiddenClan would never truly accept him. He would always remain an outsider, never really belonging. Rowanpaw would spend the rest of his days avoiding torment and protecting a clan that wouldn't do the same for him.

Blind with rage, it was easy for him to trip over a protruding tree root. Hissing, Rowanpaw tumbled into the dirt. At first, Rowanpaw didn't want to get up. He wanted to lie there until leaf-bare came and the snow chilled him to the bone. He wanted the snow to make

him numb to the pain. Rowanpaw wondered if it could ever be cold enough to numb his heart.

What was wrong with him?! After everything that's happened, he still cared! He still cared what the clan thought, what Skystar thought. Heck, he still cared what *Ravenwing* thought! But most of all, he cared what Hazelpaw thought about him. Even though he shouldn't.

Then two paws appeared right in front of his vision. Rowanpaw lifted his gaze to see Poisonblood standing over him. The powerful russet tabby narrowed his eyes at him.

"Well? Are you going to get up?"

Rowanpaw signed and closed his eyes. "Just let me die here."

"No, I'm not going to let you throw your life away." Poisonblood growled, "I'm not going to do that." He jabbed Rowanpaw in the ribs with his paw. "Get up. Now."

For some reason, Rowanpaw felt compelled to obey. He stood up on wobbly legs in front of Poisonblood. "Are you happy now?"

"I will be when you learn how to defend yourself." Poisonblood's voice rumbled. "You're stronger than you know, Rowanpaw. You could rule this forest one day."

"I don't want to rule anything!" Rowanpaw snapped. "I just want to be accepted!"

In the blink of an eye, Rowanpaw was pinned beneath Poisonblood's razor sharp claws. "If you spend the rest of your life trying to please others, you'll only look like a fool." Poisonblood raised his paw with claws outstretched and, by instinct, Rowanpaw slipped out of his grasp and dodged the blow.

He stood up and faced Poisonblood with wide eyes. Poisonblood flew at him and Rowanpaw dived underneath him. Twisting, Rowanpaw kicked up and sent Poisonblood flying into a tree trunk. Back on his paws, Rowanpaw stood ready for the counterattack.

Poisonblood shook the dust and twigs from his pelt. Then he squared up with Rowanpaw. "That's more like it. I can teach you how to fight, Rowanpaw, *really* fight. Your clanmates won't dare to mess with you."

"And what if they do anyways?" Rowanpaw wondered.

Red took over Poisonblood's irises. "Then you take vengeance."

Sequel

First off, I want to thank all of my readers! It means so much to me to hear your thoughts! The first book is completed! Follow Rowanpaw's story in *Warriors || Tainted Blood: Book 2*